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# A Step into The Past

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Book 19

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Huang Yi

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Author : Huang Yi

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Endless Future Troubles**

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Despite being held prisoner under the iron hands of the indomitable Guardians, this tender, lovely girl still maintained a look of fearlessness. A look of disdain on her face, she icily said to Xiang Shaolong, "So Master Xiang wears a set of impenetrable armor beneath his clothes. No wonder you are so bold and fearless!"

For some reason, Xiang Shaolong felt that something was out of place, but he couldn't quite figure out what the problem was.

Jing Shan and Wu Guang had each seized her by an arm and bent them behind her back. Reasonably speaking, it should be very difficult for her to make any movements at this time.

Teng Yi clearly felt the same strange feeling that he had. This man of steel was different from the likes of Jing Jun and the Guardians, whose eyes were feasting on the sight of her chest, pushed straight due to her arms being pressed against her back. He icily shouted, "Kneel!"

Jing Shan and Wu Guang pressed down hard. How could the soft-boned beauty resist? Even her beautiful, flexible legs had lost their ability to threaten anyone now.

The sound of people coming in from outside could be heard, as Ji Yanran and

the rest came in as well.

Right at this moment, a thought flashed across Xiang Shaolong's mind. He realized what the problem was.

She shouldn't have been so easily seized.

Based on her skill as demonstrated at Lu Buwei's performance, it would not be an easy feat for his men to seize her and take her alive. And if she had just taken a step towards the window instead, how could the Guardians have so easily caught her? She must have been feigning.

The reason was because she saw that he was still alive, and heard him command his men not to kill her. That was why she purposefully allowed his men to capture her, so as to make yet another attempt at assassination.

At this moment, everyone was naturally looking towards the main entrance.

Xiang Shaolong also feigned distraction.

At that moment, the soft-boned beauty took in a deep breath, then spat out. A bolt of light shot out of her mouth, streaking towards Xiang Shaolong's face.

Teng Yi and the others were caught by surprise, utterly shocked.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly dodged, slipping past the hidden weapon. The soft-boned beauty's body made a few strange contortions and somehow

managed to slip away from Wu Guang and Jing Shan's grasps. Then, as slippery as a loach, she somehow threw the two away, into the midst of the company. Her movements were astonishingly fast and slick, causing all the watchers to praise her skills.

Just as everyone was shouting in anger and shock, the soft-boned beauty grabbed herself by the knees and curled up into a ball. Like a large rubber ball, she rolled next to a window in the blink of an eye. Before anyone had a chance to stop her, she shot out, flying away through the window.

The Guardians had just suffered a tremendous loss of face. They furiously chased after her.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest exchanged amazed glances. None of them had expected that the soft-boned beauty would be so formidable. At this moment, Lords Changping and Changwen, along with Huan Yi, came rushing in, having just heard the news. The entire manor became very lively, both inside and out.

When Xiang Shaolong awoke, he felt refreshed and energetic. All of the previous night's worries had been washed clean away.

As he got out of bed, he accidentally woke up the ever-lazy-a-bed Ji Yanran. She sleepily threw herself into his embrace, cooing absent-mindedly, "It's still dark outside, isn't it? Let's sleep for a while longer." Xiang Shaolong pulled her close. After affectionately cuddling for a time, he said, "Going forwards, I'm going to wake up before the rooster crows in order to practice the Hundred Battles Sabreplay as well as barehanded martial arts. Just by

observing that soft-boned assassin, we can tell that the world contains countless numbers of skilled people. If we aren't careful, we'll suffer calamity."

When Ji Yanran recalled how that soft-boned beauty had spat a hair-thin needle out from her mouth last night, she felt a sense of lingering fear. "How astounding. She could hold a needle like that in her mouth but speak easily and normally, without raising any suspicions."

Xiang Shaolong slapped her white buttocks hard. Laughing, he said, "Dear wife, sleep for a bit longer!"

Making a lovable face, Ji Yanran got up as well. She grumbled, "After that spank of yours, my desire to sleep has flown away."

Xiang Shaolong's gaze naturally and unconsciously fell upon the half-open neckline of her sleepware, which revealed the deep valley of her cleavage. He felt his pulse quicken, and just barely kept himself from pressing this alluring woman down against the bed. He secretly steadied himself and forced himself away.

He couldn't help but suddenly recall the warning which Li Mu had given him. If he wasn't careful, he would allow the natural lust between man and woman to entangle him, causing himself not to live up to this famous Zhao general's hopes.

Ji Yanran jumped down from the bed as well. Smiling joyfully, her face like a flower, she said, "Allow me to service Great General Xiang by bathing him

and dressing him, alright?"

By the time the first rays of dawn began to peek over the horizon, Xiang Shaolong had already rushed to the Imperial Palace. Xiao Pan was in the middle of eating breakfast. When he saw him arrive, Xiao Pan hurriedly told him to join. Upon hearing Xiang Shaolong explain what had happened last night, he flew into a royal rage. "Lu Buwei, that treacherous dog. In the future, We shall make sure that he doesn't even have a burial plot! He knows that you, master, are Our most beloved subject, and yet he still dares to act so rashly and presumptuously."

Xiang Shaolong laughed. "Crown Prince, it isn't as though you are discovering for the first time what type of person he is! Getting angry is a waste of time. It was fortunate that Meng Tian reported this to us this time. But that female assassin really is a first-rate expert."

Xiao Pan was stunned for a long moment, before suddenly laughing in spite of himself. "If anyone else had said those words, We would only be even more furious. But since you were the one to say the words, master, We....ahem, I only feel a warm feeling in my heart. I feel very comfortable. Hah! Those words of mine really were pointless. But I really don't understand why you handed those people over to Guan Zhongxie, master." Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't tell them that it was because he knew that they wouldn't be able to overthrow Lu Buwei in the next few years, making any attempt at doing so meaningless. Instead, he calmly said, "For an event of this magnitude to happen within the city, someone must take responsibility. Weren't we trying to come up with a suitable position for Meng Wu and Meng Tian?" Xiao Pan's royal countenance trembled. Joy shooting from his

eyes, he cried out in approval. "Master, that really is a formidable plan! Especially seeing as how last night, Guan Zhongxie was forced to submit to your sword...ahem, that is, your sabre. His prestige has taken a huge tumble. This is what is known as...what's the proper way to describe this?" Xiang Shaolong knew that he was feeling extremely excited and so found it difficult to convey his thoughts. He completed Xiao Pan's phrase. "When he's ill, go for the kill!"

Xiao Pan slapped the table. "Just so! When he's ill, go for the kill. If even the city defense force falls into my hands, even if Lu Buwei and Lao Ai sprout three heads and six arms apiece, they won't be able to move against me."

At this moment, a servant came with the news that the ministers had been assembled for the morning court.

Exchanging grins, the two went off to attend morning court.

The great hall was filled with a solemn, stately air.

With all of the amazing events which had occurred last night, everyone present had heard at least some of the stories. Everyone felt that this affair would be difficult to wrap up.

After Xiang Shaolong was promoted to the rank of Great General, his position became much higher than it had been previously. He ranked only behind Wang He, Wang Ci, Meng Ao, and Du Bi, and so calmly seated himself besides them.



Aside from the five of them, the only other two Great Generals were Wang Jian and An Gu.

Of the three people placed at the highest position, Xiao Pan's expression looked the most vigorous. Zhu Ji and Lu Buwei, seated by his side and a little lower, both looked extremely tired. Clearly, they hadn't slept well last night.

After everyone paid their obeisance, Xiao Pan launched the first attack as he began to question Xiang Shaolong about the previous night's events.

Xiang Shaolong slowly, systematically described everything which had happened last night, then said towards Guan Zhongxie, "Official Guan, please present us with the results of your interrogation."

Guan Zhongxie, seated below Huan Yi, took a few steps forward and bowed down. "All of those thugs died from drugs they had hidden on their bodies. Afterwards, we discovered poison pills hidden in their mouths. They bit into the pills, causing the poison to enter their stomachs. By the time we discovered it, it was too late."

These words immediately caused a commotion.

Xiang Shaolong naturally didn't believe a word of it. This clearly was Lu Buwei's plan, to kill these people in order to silence them.

But there was no need for him to speak. Lao Ai, standing opposite to him, solemnly said, "Crown Prince, please guide us with your wisdom. For such a large group of men to be able to sneak into the city and attempt to

assassinate a senior minister, with a careful, meticulous plot that was clearly premeditated and planned out long ago, is a serious event that cannot be easily dismissed. Not only must we seek out and pursue the mastermind behind their actions, we also must find out what weakness in our city defenses was exposed. How else can we explain the fact that so many people snuck into our city without us knowing?" Everyone nodded in agreement. Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan simultaneously groaned in silence.

Judging from Lao Ai's attitude, and how directly he was trying to assign blame on someone, they could tell that he and Zhu Ji had made an agreement to try and seize the position of the Imperial Infantry Commander for their own.

Lu Buwei, Guang Zhongxie, and Meng Ao also saw what Lao Ai was attempting to do. Instantly, their faces changed.

But Lord Changping hadn't quite thought things through yet. He berated Guan Zhongxie, "Official Guan, are you saying that you don't know anything about those people's origins?" Guan Zhongxie calmly said, "I have asked for instructions from the Premier Mentor. Since the situation was strange and unusual, the Premier Mentor ordered me to fully investigate this matter before making my report to the Crown Prince."

Du Bi let out a cold harrumph. "Official Guan, after being busy for an entire night, you have nothing to report at all? Actually, just from their weapons and their clothes, you should have enough information as to pinpoint their status and origins, and to point out the person behind their actions."

Lu Buwei laughed loudly. "Great General Du's words are wise. These

assassin's weapons were all forged at the weapon foundry in Tunliu [near modern Shanxi], owned by Pu Juan. The only reason why I didn't allow this to be reported was because I feared that others were framing him, which is why I ordered Zhongxie to make additional inquiries. But if Great General Du feels that this evidence is already sufficient and conclusive, please request the Crown Prince to issue the order and have Pu Juan immediately executed."

Du Bi's expression changed dramatically. He roared out, "That's outrageous!"

He turned towards Xiao Pan and was about to speak, but Xiao Pan calmly said, "Great General Du, calm yourself. Naturally, We know that that someone is trying to frame Mr. Pu!"

Only then did Du Bi slowly regain his former calm. He glared at Lu Buwei fiercely, but no longer spoke.

Naturally, Xiao Pan didn't feel any particular good will towards Du Bi or Pu Juan. But at this point in time, he still needed to wait for the Black Dragon to appear and for his own footing to be solidified before he could make his move against Du Bi and Pu Juan.

Otherwise, if he tried to take on too much, Lu Buwei would seize the opportunity to increase his own power and maybe even try to revolt in the ensuing chaos. In that case, the losses would be greater than the potential gains.

The military clique which Du Bi and Pu Juan were representing were primarily based upon popular discontent and the instability of the three eastern

prefectures. If they also colluded with the country of Zhao, they would be very difficult to deal with.

Lu Buwei seized the chance to speak. "For such a group of people to enter the city to cause trouble, there clearly must be someone protecting them for them to pass the city walls. Thus, the question we should be asking is not who to assign blame to, but rather, who the mastermind is. This is similar to Lord Gaoling's attempt to rebel during the imperial hunting party. Someone must have been protecting him and covering for him the entire time. Great General Xiang, you were given orders to investigate this affair. Do you have a report for us?" This technique of 'defending while attacking' really was formidable. The focus of attention was suddenly thrust upon Great General Xiang.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly furious that he hadn't been able to seize that soft-boned beauty from last night. If he had, he would be able to produce her and see how Lu Buwei would handle the situation. Just as he planned to speak, Xiao Pan calmly said, "Great General Xiang, under Our orders, was investigating the matter. But halfway through, he was waylaid and pursued, causing him to miss his mark. We are in the process of examining this matter and should have results soon."

In saying so, Xiao Pan was resting that entire affair on his own person. Lu Buwei could only awkwardly smile and had nothing else to say.

The atmosphere suddenly became extremely awkward.

If anyone else were to continue pursuing this matter and attempt to assign

blame, they would be directly opposing Lu Buwei.

Although Xiang Shaolong and Lu Buwei were clearly on opposite, irreconcilable sides, he did not want to push the situation too far here.

Zhu Ji, who had been silent up to now, said in a soft voice, "Since the Premier Mentor feels that there is no need to assign blame over this matter, I will certainly respect his advice. But increasing the city's defenses is an important, pressing matter. I fear that Official Guan will not be able to handle this weighty responsibility by himself. The position of Assistant Infantry Commander really should no longer be left empty. Inner Custodian, you should be more familiar with city defense than any others, due to your rank. Do you have any suggestions as to who should fill this position?" Xiao Pan, Xiang Shaolong, Lord Changping, and even Lu Buwei all silently cried out in alarm. For Zhu Ji to openly ask Lao Ai his opinion on who to appoint, wasn't this clearly inviting him to appoint one of his own men and whittle away Guan Zhongxie's authority? Since Zhu Ji spoke so openly, not even Xiao Pan or Lu Buwei could openly countermand her.

Lao Ai really did do as everyone expected. He leisurely said, "This humble official has a guest named Han Jie. Before he came here, he participated in the defense of the capital of Yan. He is a rare talent. When it comes to selecting an Assistant Infantry Commander, he really would be the best choice."

Zhu Ji said, "Your suggestion is very much in line with my own thoughts. If none of the ministers present have any objections, then let it be so."

Lu Buwei said in a deep voice, "Right now, the Imperial Cavalry have three Assistant Commanders. We should also add yet another Assistant Infantry Commander as well, so that he, along with Han Jie, may better assist Guan Zhongxie in performing his duties. This old minister already has a person in mind; Xu Shang of Shangcai. With his assistance, nothing else will go wrong."

Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan, Li Si, and Lord Changping's faces all dropped. None of them had imagined that things would progress to such a stage.

It was a good thing that the palace guard commander was, by tradition, a member of the royal family. Else, Lu Buwei and Lao Ai would probably try to divide that post up as well.

Wang Wen, Cai Ze, and Meng Ao immediately voiced their approval.

Since Lao Ai had already recommended Han Jie, it was now difficult for him to oppose Lu Buwei's suggestion.

Xiang Shaolong and the others could no longer recommend Meng Wu or Meng Tian. If they did so, they would arouse Lu Buwei's suspicions and make the suggestion pointless.

In the end, the result was that Xu Shang was chosen.

Xiang Shaolong sighed in dismay, but the rice was already cooked, and there was no going back.

Not only were they unable to budge Guan Zhongxie, Lao Ai's authority

actually increased. This was what was known as "Failing to steal the chicken, and losing the rice as well."

With the positions of Assistant Infantry Commander, under Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's auspices, Xu Shang and Han Jie both were in a position to secure powerful, prominent military positions. By that time, they would have endless future troubles.

After the morning court was concluded, Xiang Shaolong felt greatly dispirited. As he hurriedly left the palace, he passed by Qin Qing's residence. His heart suddenly moved, he went to go seek her. This peerless beauty was in her garden, embroidering a flower. Winter had just ended and spring had just arrived. The wind and the sun were both beautiful, and the day was warm. Qin Qing was hard at work, beneath the auspices of a lively, flourishing tree. Her plain, simple dress only accentuated her own jade-like visage, possessing an allure all her own.

Qin Qing saw that Xiang Shaolong made the time to come visit her, despite being so busy, and felt a sense of unexpected joy. Laying down the embroidery, she slipped her hand into his and took him on a tour of the garden.

Xiang Shaolong, feeling her smooth hand, sighed, "The purpose of my trip here today is to thank Grand Tutor Qin for saving my life."

Qin Qing smiled. "You're always like this. You'd rather die than not startle others. When did I ever save your life?" Xiang Shaolong related to her the story of how her protective vest had deflected the assassin's knife. As Qin

Qing listened, all the blood drained from her flower-like face. "How could there be such a deadly female assassin in the world? Even an expert such as Jing Shan found himself helpless against her! Oh Shaolong! I really am going to die from worry."

Xiang Shaolong laughed. "No need to fret. Although it is true that the assassin was highly skilled, the primary reason she was able to escape is that most men are lecherous and are usually not on their guard against a skinny lass. That's what gave her the chance to escape. If it had been a male assassin, Jing Shan and the others would've given her several good punches right from the start and caused her face to swell up like a pig, and then would've also paralyzed her entire body. How would she have had the chance to make another attempt at assassination?"

Qin Qing was deeply amused by his words. Laughing so hard that she made the flowers tremble, she gently rested her arm against his shoulder. Only after a long time did she manage to gasp out, "With you by my side, I'm always laughing without end! Hmph! You terrible man, you've stolen my wits from me!"

This was the first time that Xiang Shaolong had heard Qin Qing speak so candidly and expose her innermost thoughts. His heart growing warm, he pulled her into his embrace. Overjoyed, he said, "Grand Tutor Qin, please don't forget what you have promised me!"

Qin Qing raised her flower-like face towards him, a look of desire upon it. "What I promised you?...oh...I'm not talking to you about that anymore! Quickly let me go, it would be terrible if someone saw us together like this."



Xiang Shaolong's mood improved as he saw that look of lust mixed with reluctance on her face. Laughing, he said, "Grand Tutor Qin, it seems as though you finally remember that you promised me that I can do whatever I wish to you after my battle with ole' Guan. Hah! The weather is stupendous today. Why don't we..."

Qin Qing was terribly embarrassed. With a forceful push, she escaped from his clutches. Stamping her foot, she yelled, "Don't say anything else, or I'll call for my bodyguards and have you expelled!"

Xiang Shaolong roared with laughter, filled with unspeakable merriment. Opening his arms widely, he said, "My little darling, quickly come back to my arms!"

Qin Qing's ears were a fiery red. Feeling both happy and embarrassed, there naturally was nothing she could do to him. After rolling her eyes at him, she said in a soft voice, "Would it be acceptable for me to accompany you after the Spring Sacrifices? Hey! Weren't you supposed to go with little Jun to Lu Gong's residence to propose marriage? Why are you dawdling here instead?" Only now did Xiang Shaolong remember that Jing Jun was impatiently waiting for him at their offices. All he could do was pull her into his arms one more time and give her a thorough groping before he left.

When he returned to his office, he found Jing Jun there fidgeting impatiently. Lord Changping and Huan Qi had arrived as well. Xiang Shaolong wanted to sit down and drink a cup of tea first, but Jing Jun grabbed him immediately. And so their entire group headed towards Lu Gong's residence.

There were many people on the street. It was both bustling and peaceful.

By this point in time, Xiang Shaolong was a person who was often spoken about by the common man in the streets. The people of Qin have always worshipped heroes. Knowing that last night, he had utterly triumphed over Guan Zhongxie, everyone was filled with the utmost admiration and pointed towards him as he passed by. When he courteously smiled at a group of young ladies who were chasing after him and staring at him, they were so mesmerized that they almost fainted.

Although Lord Changping's rank was that of the Left Premier, his public notoriety was far lower than that of Xiang Shaolong's. Tremendously envious, he said, "Shaolong, your battle last night has shaken the entirety of Xianyang. I'm basking in your victory as well. After I went home last night, Ying Ying couldn't stop praising you. I'm terrified that she might change her mind again and come chasing after you once more, refusing to marry Duanhe."

Xiang Shaolong felt very gratified, feeling as though he had finally managed to do a big favor for this close friend of his. He casually asked about something else. "When is little Yi going to return to the palace?" Huan Yi respectfully replied, "The Crown Prince bade me return only after the Spring Sacrifices are over. Alas! Right now, my special army's troops are not fully equipped and armored yet. There are many things that I wish to do but do not have the strength to. After this morning's court was held, Lu Buwei hunted me down to have a talk. He wanted me to accept Meng Wu and Meng Tian into my army as assistant commanders. But how could I possibly agree?" A look of shock appeared on Xiang Shaolong's face, as well as everyone else's.

Lord Changping laughed softly, "What are you afraid of? Go ahead and satisfy him!"

Astonished, Huan Yi stared at Lord Changping.

Xiang Shaolong said in a quiet voice, "The Left Premier's words are correct. Little Wu and little Tian are both on our side."

Overjoyed, Huan Yi said, "Then my rapid-response army is saved!"

Teng Yi laughed from behind them. "Go quickly and agree to the offer!"

Just as Huan Yi was about to leave the group, Lord Changping pulled him over. He instructed, "Little Yi, if you can pretend that you are throwing in with Lu Buwei's side and joining him, the Crown Prince will be even more appreciative."

Huan Yi was not a person who was good at deception. A look of discomfort appeared on his face.

Xiang Shaolong said, "Little Yi only needs to act in accordance with his usual attitude and behavior. If you try too hard, you'll actually raise Lu Buwei's suspicions instead. Understood?" Nodding, Huan Yi accepted the advice and joyfully departed.

As they crossed the last street, Lu Gong's residence appeared in plain sight. Jing Jun began to feel nervous and hesitant and hid himself in the back of the group.

The group roaring with laughter, Xiang Shaolong took the front and led them into the residence.

To be able to create a blissful, happy future for one's brother truly was one of the greatest delights in one's life.

## Chapter 2

### Distilling Spirits, Discussing Wine

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This night, the Wu family residence put on a magnificent feast, in honor of Jing Jun's impending marriage. As a side-benefit, they also celebrated Xiang Shaolong's fierce defeat of Lu Buwei's vile schemes.

Aside from their own people and Qin Qing, the only outsiders present were Lords Changping and Changwen, Wang He, Wang Ling, Huan Yi, Li Si, Yang Duanhe, and a few others.

The most amazing thing was that Lu Dan'er managed to sneak out as well to join the celebration. Naturally, she and Jing Jun became the butt of their good-natured jokes and added to the festivities.

Just as the festivities were reaching its peak, Wu Yingyuan joyfully shouted, "Recently, I won a large sum of money, and have been vexed as to how I should spend it all. Friends, do you have any suggestions?" Wang He laughed, "This is the vexation of all gamblers. When they have money, all they can think about is how to spend it. But when they lose and owe others money, they have to painfully scrape it together from various sources. But of course! Mr. Wu's wealth matches that of an entire nation. Naturally, he only suffers from the first vexation!"

Everyone roared with laughter, aside from Huan Yi, whose lips pursed.

Seeing the situation, Xiang Shaolong suddenly came up with an idea. "Why don't we spend this money by helping little Yi outfit his rapid-response army!"

Everyone unanimously acclaimed the idea, but also felt it was a bit inappropriate.

Lord Changping asked, "Little Yi, you haven't yet told us what happened when you met with Lu Buwei."

Huan Yi let out several sighs before speaking. "When it comes to playing tricks, how can I be a match for that slippery old bandit? Although I agreed to propose to the court tomorrow morning that Meng Tian and Meng Wu be made my assistant commanders, he still uses the construction of the canal as an excuse for only gradually increasing my rapid-response army's funding. This clearly is for the sake of pressuring and controlling me."

Everyone felt a massive headache oncoming upon hearing these words. Lu Buwei was tightly grasping the purse strings of the kingdom, and using it to control the armies in a roundabout way. Any army setting out on an expedition or which required additional funding had to go through his permission and meet his demands.

Of the people present, Li Si was the most familiar with their national financial situation. He reminded, "Mr. Wu, why don't you offer this sum of money to the Crown Prince? The Crown Prince can place the money in his royal treasure and use it whenever an outlay of funds is needed, rather than needing to go through Lu Buwei and dealing with his blandishments."

Filled with a heroic aura, Wu Yingyuan said, "That's easy enough. I can add an additional sum of money on top of it as well and make the royal treasury very impressive indeed. As long as it causes difficulty for Lu Buwei, there is nothing that I, Wu Yingyuan, am not willing to do."

Everyone shouted in support.

As they were still discussing the details of the matter and were filled with optimism, Wang He let out a sigh. "All my life, I, Wang He, have only admired three people. Generals Bai Qi, Li Mu, and Lian Po. Bai Qi was ruthless and cunning, and Lian Po is unshakeable and profound. But when it comes to a divine-like ability to direct armies and unspeakably brilliant military tactics, Li Mu is the best. Even though the country of Zhao has lost Lian Po, so long as it has Li Mu, Great Qin will find it difficult to easily subjugate Zhao.

Curious, Wang Ling asked, "Everyone is filled with joy and happiness tonight. Ole' He, why must you suddenly be so gloomy?"

Under everyone's curious gaze, Wang He forced out a laugh. "Because I just received a message from the country of Wei. King Anli has fallen ill. This led me to remember that Lian Po's days are numbered as well, which saddens me."

Jing Jun didn't understand. "I've heard that King Anli was never willing to put Lian Po's services to good use. His passing should only bring benefit to Lian Po. Why do you say that Lian Po's days are numbered as well?"

Also surprised, Tao Fang remarked, "Lian Po is currently residing at Lord

Xinling's residence. Clearly, he has a very close relationship with Prince Wuji. If King Anli passes away, Lord Xinling will become the most powerful man in Wei. When the river rises, the boat rises with it. Lian Po's situation will only improve, not worsen. Great General, why do you suggest otherwise?"

Wang He saw that all of the onlookers seemed befuddled. Only Ji Yanran alone seemed to understand his thoughts. A gloomy look shooting forth from his eyes, he mournfully said, "As the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together. Although I have always faced Lian Po across the field of slaughter as enemies, seeing him fall to such a state causes me great pain. As to why I have this view of things, I am sure Learned Lady Ji already knows. I'd like to ask the Learned Lady to explain to everyone!"

Everyone present knew that Ji Yanran had lived in Daliang for a long period of time, and was clearly informed as to the going-on's of that place. Everyone's eyes turned towards her.

A lost, chilly look had already appeared in the eyes of this learned, world-famous beauty. Her fragrant lips gently sighed. "If King Anli is about to die, Prince Xinling will not long survive him. After Lian Po loses his source of support, the only option he will have is to flee Wei and depart. Although the people of Chu have Li Yuan, they are too satisfied to simply hold their current territories. It is likely that Lian Po will never accomplish anything ever again.

Only now did everyone understand.

Based on King Anli's temperament, in the days before his death, he would come up with vicious ways to murder Lord Xinling or force him to his death



somehow. Otherwise, the Crown Prince of Wei would find his position difficult to maintain. When it comes to a struggle over royal power, there would be no mercy or humanity.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Lord Longyang. He would naturally be a member of the Crown Prince's clique. With King Anli's illness, Lord Longyang would naturally now be in the middle of a fierce, ferocious life-and-death battle. This was a battle of either total victory or total defeat. There wouldn't be the slightest bit of gray.

Huan Yi respectfully asked Wang He for more advice. "Elder General Wang, earlier, you said that Bai Qi was a hair inferior to Li Mu. Might I ask why you say this? All know that he has never lost a battle. Over thirty seven years of war, he had conquered over seventy cities and displayed his power. He understood his enemies and was extremely adaptable, filled with endless stratagems and never once tasting defeat. At the battle of Changping, he feigned a retreat to lure the opponent in, then encircled and cut them off. This strategy resulted in victory in a single swoop, causing Zhao to be dramatically weakened. Who can compare with his accomplishments in that single short battle?"

Huan Yi clearly held a tremendous amount of esteem for that elder, now-deceased general, Bai Qi. He couldn't resist from speaking in Bai Qi's defense.

A nostalgic look appeared in Wang He's eyes. He slowly said, "Bai Qi was the principal commander at the battle of Changping. I was the subordinate commander. At this time, that was a highly classified secret. The late king had actually issued an order: 'Anyone who reveals the presence of Bai Qi, the

Lord of Martial Peace, is to be executed.' The people of Zhao did not know that the commander of our army was actually the Lord of Martial Peace. This was a tactic which Bai Qi often employed. In order to use it successfully, he would refrain from nothing."

Xiang Shaolong felt a very peculiar sensation in his heart.

For a man of the twenty first century to return to the ancient Warring States period and listen to a famous general like Wang He slowly narrate that most critical, most pivotal of battles, was a difficult-to-describe feeling.

The battle of Changping could be said to be the most commonly-discussed battle by people of this era. Aside from the people of Zhao, who were unwilling to discuss that heart-breaking event, everyone else talked about it nonstop. But as they listened to Wang He, who had actually participated in the battle as an important general on the Qin side, everyone present felt a sense of awe towards him, and felt all the more interested and thrilled to listen.

Wang He sighed. "Lian Po really did grow even more unyielding with age. He knew that I was in a strong position and he was in a weak one. He diverted all of his efforts into defending, with the goal of exhausting my armies. It appeared to be a conservative decision, but actually it was an entirely wise one. You must understand, Changping is surrounded by natural barriers. It really is an un-paralleled defensive hub. Before the battle of Changping, Bai Qi and I came to a strategic agreement. First, we would attack the country of Han. Bai Qi would take the lead in occupying the border between Han and Wei, a strategic point, while I would attack from the north and charge

towards Changping. But the opposing general, Lian Po, had already foreseen our actions and made preparations. He had already ordered that defensive structures be emplaced and stockpiled large amounts of food. He was prepared to engage with us in a long, grinding battle.

Wang Ling nodded. "Lian Po really is full of schemes. Not only did he cause our grand army to be faced a fortified region against which an army would be useless, he also constantly sent people out to harass and attack our supply lines, causing our armies to run short on rations and supplies. At the time, I was in charge of providing our reinforcements with their supplies. In the meantime, Lian Po was waiting at his ease for us to collapse of exhaustion. He had built that sturdy defense line as well as a solid line of communication between him and their capital, Handan. This put us in an extremely unfavorable position. The Zhao king, Xiaocheng, was young and brash and thought that Lian Po had grown timid in his old age. He fell prey to rumors of dissension which we sowed. He underestimated us and arrogantly replaced Lian Po with Zhao Kuo. If he hadn't done those things, it most likely would have been we who would have been defeated. Thus, the Battle of Changping was determined by King Xiaocheng's erroneous decision in replacing generals. The military strategies of the Lord of Martial Peace played only a secondary role."

Wang He continued to explain, "This old warrior is still filled with the utmost admiration for Great General Bai. But a formidable ruler will have formidable ministers. The late king relied heavily on Bai Qi from the very beginning. Starting from the rank of senior minister, after two years, he ascended to the rank of supreme commander of our forces. And the Lord of Martial Peace never let the late king down. In his second year of commanding the army, he

used his world-shaking armored mounted chargers at the battle of Yique to shatter the combined Han-Wei army of over two hundred and forty thousand troops with barely a third of their number and capture their general, Gongsun Xi. The country of Wei lost all five of its western provinces. The next year, he successively attacked Wei's former capital, Anyi, as well as sixty one nearby cities. This is why Wei, formerly the most powerful of all the states, has now been reduced to tottering on its last legs."

A look of deep respect appeared in Lord Changping's eyes. Sighing, he said, "Such amazing exploits are rarely seen indeed. Why is it that you still believe him to be inferior to Li Mu?"

Wang He shook his head, smiling bitterly. "The reason that the Lord of Martial Peace was able to enjoy such unprecedented success was because his tactics and stratagems were also unprecedented in their ruthlessness. After every victorious battle, he would slaughter every single captured enemy soldier so as to weaken his opponent's strength. Although this is the most formidable of tactics, it isn't a tactic which others are incapable of carrying out. In addition, it goes against the laws of heaven. It's far inferior to Li Mu's calm magnanimity. Compared to Li Mu, he is still slightly inferior.

Only now did everyone understand why it was that in Wang He's heart, Bai Qi still could not match Li Mu.

Li Mu was able to cause his enemy's leading general to be filled with admiration towards him. From this alone, one could tell how formidable he must be.

Li Si sighed. "The Battle of Changping really was the critical pivot point where Great Qin swung from a position of weakness to a position of strength. Who would have thought that the son of Zhao She, who had inflicted such a dramatic defeat on our armies in years past, would prove to be so useless. The battle which Zhao She won was the only defeat which the Lord of Martial Peace ever suffered."

Blushing, Huan Yi said, "I never considered that battle to be Bai Qi's defeat."

Wang He said with great sincerity towards Xiang Shaolong, "The reason this old warrior suggested to the Crown Prince that you be promoted to the rank of Great General was for you to serve as a counter to Li Mu. When I look about me at the generals of Qin, only you and Wang Jian could give Li Mu a good tussle. Although Wang Ling and I both have a high reputation, we lack the ability you have of making soldiers willing to give their lives for you."

Deep inside, Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly. He might be able to deal with others, but with Li Mu? Even if he could harden his heart to do so, the chances for success were slim. But hatefully, this was something which would happen sooner or later.

Lord Changping nodded. "The Great General's words are like an arrow that flies straight to the mark. Recently, Li Mu has annihilated over a hundred thousand Xiongnu horsemen, then forced several barbarian tribes in Donghu and Linhu to surrender. He has forced Chanyu [the traditional title for the Xiongnu leader] Wang of the Xiongnu into a very difficult position. In the short term, he won't be able to infringe upon Zhao territories. In a time of chaos and danger such as we are in now, no matter how suspicious and

jealous Empress Jing and Guo Kai might be of Li Mu, they'll be forced to recall him and have him defend the eastern borders."

Li Si calmly said, "Aside from General Li Mu, the country of Zhao have two other major generals as well; Pang Yuan and Sima Shang. For the moment, Guo Kai is still suppressing Li Mu with all his might. But once Pang Yuan and Sima Shang taste the sting of defeat, the time for Li Mu's return will draw near."

Xiang Shaolong's admiration for Li Mu increased even more. Even such a ferocious general such as Wang He seemed to turn pale when even mentioning Li Mu's name. From this, one could tell that he really was an extraordinary hero.

Everyone discussed this for a while longer before they all departed.

When he woke up the next morning, Xiang Shaolong first painstakingly practiced his sabre style for a while before leaving the manor with Ji Yanran. The latter was heading out for the sake of preparing for the Black Dragon's appearance during the Spring Sacrifices. If anything went wrong, they would become the greatest laughingstocks of the world.

Li Si had already informed Xiao Pan in advance regarding Wu Yingyuan's donation to the imperial coffers and Huan Yi needing financial support for the outfitting of his rapid-response army. Thus, he didn't need to see Xiao Pan immediately, and proceeded directly to the morning court, saving much time.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt incomparably relaxed. Ever since King Zhuan's murder, good things and bad things had come crashing forward in waves, starting with the imperial hunt, then the trip to the country of Chu, followed by the battle just two nights ago. He had been so busy that he hadn't even had the chance to take a breath. But at this moment, the pressure was greatly relieved.

For the near future at least, there shouldn't be anything particularly troublesome.

He could be considered somewhat pitiable. Aside from those few short days of bliss when he first arrived and lived with Mei Canniang, he hadn't been able to whole-heartedly enjoy this marvelous life in the past which had been given to him.

Just as his thoughts began to wander, the sound of hoofsteps behind him could be heard.

Xiang Shaolong and the Eighteen Guardians simultaneously turned their heads. It was Lao Ai. Behind him was Han Jie, and behind them was a large group of their followers, clearing a path for them.

In terms of style and air, Xiang Shaolong did appear a bit inferior.

Lao Ai turned in towards Xiang Shaolong. Laughing, he said, "Official Xiang, why did you leave out your younger brother and not invite me to last night's banquet?"

Xiang Shaolong felt extremely awkward. As he busily greeted Han Jie and the others, he suddenly managed to come up with an answer. Smiling, he said, "How could that be considered a banquet? It was just that Lord Changping spontaneously decided to throw me a congratulatory party, and forced the Wang generals to come as well. But the food and wine they drank all belonged to me, and they took full advantage of it! Official Lao, please don't blame me; if you must blame someone, blame that dratted Left Premier!"

Hearing his amusing words, Lao Ai, Han Jie, and everyone else present roared with laughter. The atmosphere became, at least superficially, much more friendly.

Lao Ai laughed so hard that he began to pant for breath. "Official Xiang's eloquence can perhaps match that of Su Qi and Zhang Yi. You make it impossible for your younger brother to blame anyone. By the by, I also wish to apologize to you. The other night, Qiu Risheng decided of his own accord to act so audaciously. Your younger brother has already severely scolded him. I hope that Official Xiang won't take it to heart."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cheered. He knew that Lao Ai had decided to focus on Lu Buwei as his principle enemy, which is why he had so humbly and courteously come to mend fences with him. Laughing, he said, "Sometimes, subordinates just aren't very obedient. Oh! Why hasn't Guo Xing come to report to me yet?"

Behind them, Han Jie laughed. "I'm the one who is the most familiar with this matter. Before ten days or half a month or so has passed, none of his seals, stamps, or regalia will be ready. How could he dare to visit you before then?"



By this point in time, the palace gates could be seen. Catching Xiang Shaolong by surprise, Lao Ai said, "In short, the Drunken Wind Pavilion has recently been graced with the presence of a song-and-dance troop of world-class beauties. Official Xiang, tonight, you simply must come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion with me and get drunk with me. If you refuse, it means that you do not consider me, Lao Ai, as your friend."

Xiang Shaolong secretly said, "Bastard, I've never considered you to be my friend." But naturally, he couldn't reveal those thoughts. Forcing out a smile, he said, "If my wife, Ji Yanran, scolds me for not coming home and staying out late at night, then I'm afraid that you, the Inner Custodian, will have to bear the brunt of her displeasure."

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh. "I never knew that Official Xiang was so witty! Alas! I wish night would come sooner, so that I might enjoy a few cups of wine with you. Tonight at dusk, your younger brother will respectfully await your honored presence at the Drunken Wind Pavilion."

Xiang Shaolong secretly grumbled to himself. His hope was the exact opposite of Lao Ai's. He hoped that it would forever be day, so that he wouldn't have to spend an entire night putting on a false, hypocritical display of friendship with Lao Ai.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Yet another Venomous Scheme**

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In the tug-of-war between officials and the crown, Huan Yi's rapid-response army really was a crucial chess piece. If Xiao Pan was able to take it under his control, then anyone thinking about rebelling would have to worry about Huan Yi's crack troops.

The people in the rapid-response army were all selected from outside the capital. They were kept apart from everyone else and formed an entirely separate body of their own. Unlike the Imperial Infantry, the Imperial Cavalry, or the city guards, they wouldn't be so easily bribed or bought.

This was why Lu Buwei was extremely cautious towards them, using both soft and hard techniques to place his own people within the rapid-response army.

Fortunately, the two people he selected were Meng Wu and Meng Tian. His selection of these two candidates was also an attempt to please their father, Meng Ao.

Xiao Pan and Xiang Shaolong would naturally be 'disadvantaged' by this.

When Huan Yi made the request for two assistant commander slots to be opened under him, Lu Buwei and his men immediately and strongly recommended the Meng brothers for the positions. Xiao Pan put on an act of being hesitant and unwilling, before finally, 'reluctantly' agreeing.

Lao Ai was caught flatfooted. In those few moments, he was unable to immediately come up with candidates amongst his own people who had more military accomplishments and who came from more influential backgrounds than those two. He could only sigh in disappointment.

The marvelous thing was, this increased his animosity and wariness towards Lu Buwei all the more.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong was laughing inside. Right now, his only desire was to spend the rest of his life in peaceful happiness after the Black Dragon made its appearance. By the time Xiao Pan ascended to the throne, Lu Buwei's position would have been drastically weakened. With a single blow, they would lay both Lu Buwei and Lao Ai flat, and then he would naturally retire from office. Aside from his distaste towards war, he couldn't bear to watch the six nations be flattened by the Qin juggernaut. And there was a third, hidden reason which even he himself wasn't willing to clearly think about. It was Xiao Pan's imminent 'deterioration'.

The historical Qin Shihuang became brutal, tyrannical, and utterly despotic in all of his dealings. If he were to remain by Xiao Pan's side, how could he bear to watch Xiao Pan devolve into such a person?

Thus, the only option he had was to avoid watching and depart.

He was affecting history, but history was also affecting him. As to the questions of cause and effect, of the chicken and the egg? Most likely, even Heaven wouldn't be able to discern the answers clearly.

After the morning court ended, Lu Buwei was openly jubilant while Xiao Pan and the others were secretly so.

Xiang Shaolong was summoned by Xiao Pan to his study room. Together with Li Si and Lord Changping, they analyzed the plans behind the Black Dragon's appearance in great detail before departing the palace.

As he passed by the Qin residence, he couldn't resist from sneaking in and seeking her yet again. He didn't expect to find her ordering people to pack her belongings. When she saw him, she pulled him off to one side. A single tear trembling in her eyes, she said, "I was just about to send someone to find you. Lady Huayang has fallen ill. I'm going to go see her immediately. Alas!"

Xiang Shaolong seemed to be totally stunned. "You are leaving in such a hurry..."

Qin Qing leaned against his chest. "The benevolence which the Lady has shown towards me is weightier than a mountain. Over the past few years, her health has grown poorer and poorer. It's amazing that she's made it as long as she has. That is why Qin Qing must be by her side, no matter what, during these last few days that she will have. After this affair is finished, I will return to your side. Please don't say anything which would make me feel even worse, alright?" Xiang Shaolong calmed himself. "Does the Crown Prince know?"

Qin Qing said, "I just ordered someone to go inform him and the Empress Dowager."

What else could Xiang Shaolong say? He personally escorted her out of the city. They traveled for over ten li before reluctantly parting. By the time he returned to Xianyang, it was nightfall and gaudy lanterns had already been raised. He remembered his appointment with Lao Ai, and let out a helpless sigh. And then, he went to keep his appointment.

As he entered the Drunken Wind Pavilion, Wu Fu came to greet him, personally escorting him to the private courtyard which Lao Ai had reserved. Bowing, he said, "The Lord Inner Custodian came long ago."

Xiang Shaolong casually asked, "Who else is here?"

Wu Fu said, "The majority of the people present are the Lord Inner Custodian's guests. The only exception is Mister Pu."

Astonished, Xiang Shaolong came to a halt. Losing his voice, he cried out, "Pu Hu actually came?"

At the moment, the two were standing on a small pathway outside of the courtyard with a grove. Many customers and serving girls were crossing by. Wu Fu pulled Xiang Shaolong aside, into the grove, checking to see if anyone was near, aside from the Eighteen Guardians. Only then did he say in a low voice, "Great General, would you be willing to hear a few sincere, heartfelt words from I, Wu Fu?"

Xiang Shaolong groaned to himself. Any who believed the 'sincere, heartfelt words' from a person like Wu Fu would surely be either an idiot or a retard.

But of course, on the surface, he acted very interested. "Owner Wu, please feel free to speak openly." At the same time, he made a few hand motions to Jing Shan and the others, ordering them to keep an eye on their surroundings."

Wu Fu suddenly fell to his knees. Kowtowing, he said, "Wu Fu wishes to follow you, lord. In the future, I will be loyal to you, and you alone."

Xiang Shaolong didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. When it comes down to it, Wu Fu is a person of means and stature, as the owner of the largest brothel in Xianyang.

For such a person to abase himself before Xiang Shaolong and 'surrender' to him...how to deal with such a man?

He hurriedly pulled Wu Fu up and said, "Owner Wu, you mustn't act in such a way!"

Who would've expected that Wu Fu obstinately continued to cling to the ground? This fellow's acting ability really was something. In a tear-filled voice, he said, "Wu Fu foolishly assisted in the plan to harm Great General Xiang. Now, I am filled with regrets, but it is too late. I only hope that in the future, I be allowed to whole-heartedly devote myself to you and do something on your behalf. If you, great sir, are not willing to agree to this, then why don't you simply go and...alas!...go and kill me with a single chop of the sabre."

How could Xiang Shaolong be unaware of Wu Fu's intentions?

A lowly, base man like Wu Fu was like a man who had grass growing from his forehead. Whichever way the wind blew, he would follow.

In the past, he thought that Lu Buwei had the upper hand, and so he conspired to harm Xiang Shaolong. But now, he was slowly beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong wasn't a man to be easily crossed. And over the past few days, he was also beginning to discover that Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince were as close to one another as one's lips were to one's teeth, and that Xiang Shaolong had the support of Great Generals such as Wang He and Wang Ling. Moreover, Xiang Shaolong had triumphed over Guan Zhongxie and was himself promoted to the rank of Great General. If this continued, after Lu Buwei was defeated, he, Wu Fu, would be driven away from Xianyang, and in the worst case scenario, even his kinsmen might be affected. Considering the circumstances, the only solution was for him to profess undying loyalty towards Xiang Shaolong.

From this, he could also tell that Wu Fu had decided to place his bets on Xiao Pan in the competition for military control.

Thus, although Wu Fu was a person whose eyes were solely fixed upon the marketplace, he had far better vision and foresight than many others.

Xiang Shaolong was silent for some time, before saying in a stern voice, "If you wish for me, Xiang Shaolong, to consider you one of my people, then you must prove your loyalty to me through deeds. In addition, in the future, you must serve me with whole-hearted loyalty. Otherwise, I definitely will not spare you."

Kowtowing, Wu Fu said, "Great General, please trust me. In the end, I, Wu Fu, am an ethnic Qin. In the past, I was just foolish and muddle-headed. I thought that the Premier Mentor had the trust and affection of the Crown Prince, while you, Great General, were...were..." Xiang Shaolong didn't know how many people in the past Wu Fu had pledged his loyalty to. How could he now so easily trust him? Filled with disgust, he shouted, "Stand up before talking!"

Wu Fu continued to kowtow. "Tonight, even if this humble one has to risk life and limb, I still need to tell the Great General about Lao Ai's vile plot."

Xiang Shaolong knew from the very beginning that Wu Fu must have a card which he was preparing to play. That was why Wu Fu was willing to come to him and pledge loyalty. But he hadn't expected it to be related to Lao Ai. Half-believing, half-doubting, he said, "If Lao Ai is planning something, how would you possibly find out?" Wu Fu said, "Please allow me to explain this matter fully."

Xiang Shaolong growled softly. "If you still refuse to get up, I will immediately turn and walk away."

Wu Fu was so terrified that he leapt to his feet.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him deeper within the courtyard, to sit beneath a small bridge. "Speak. But say not a single word which is false. Otherwise, you won't live to see the next sunrise."

Ashamed, Wu Fu said, "This humble one wouldn't dare to deceive you, great



sir, Great General."

After pausing for a moment, Wu Fu focused on the subject at hand. "The Inner Custodian has recently received a guest from Qi called Mao Jiao. This person has reached the acme of fame in his chosen field of medicine."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked. Wasn't Mao Jiao the spy which Xiao Pan had sent into Lao Ai's services? How did he get caught up in this affair? Could he actually be a double agent?

Wu Fu saw that he was silent and uncommunicative. How could he guess the reason behind it? He thought that Xiang Shaolong didn't believe him, and so spoke more forcefully. "This person was once the Imperial Physician to the King of Qi. He is a man of real talent and genuine learning."

Frowning mightily, Xiang Shaolong said, "Lao Ai is going to use him to poison me? That is probably more difficult than using actual assassins."

In a hushed voice, Wu Fu said, "The person Lao Ai is going to poison is the Crown Prince."

Xiang Shaolong involuntarily cried out, "What?!"

Wu Fu solemnly and cautiously explained, "Ever since that day I met the Crown Prince, I have been unable to forget that lofty, hegemonic air he carries about him, capable of overcome the entire world. When the Crown Prince's gaze swept across me, I felt incapable of hiding anything from him. The most impressive, hardest to accomplish feat was that when he was faced

with beautiful women, he maintained his presence, unlike the likes of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, who immediately lose their bearings. Thus, last night, when Meimei came back from accompanying Lao Ai and jauntily told me that Lao Ai would soon be able to overthrow Lu Buwei, I immediately grew anxious, although she told me no more."

Xiang Shaolong felt as though he was slowly beginning to be convinced by this person whom he had always held in contempt.

The main point of doubt was that at the moment, Lao Ai didn't have a strong enough base of supporters and assistants. If he were to assassinate Xiao Pan at this point in time, there would be little direct benefit for himself and Zhu Ji. It would also be of no benefit to Lu Buwei. Both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji's source of authority ultimately sprang from Xiao Pan.

Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "If Lao Ai were to dare engage in an act of treason which would result in his entire clan being exterminated, how could he easily let others know?" Wu Fu said, "The relationship between Meimei and Lao Ai is not a superficial one. They have been intimate for many years, but in the past, because of Lu Buwei, they could only meet furtively. Now, although he has become the Inner Custodian, he still isn't able to overcome Lu Buwei. And now, with Lu Buwei intending to take her as his concubine, how could Lao Ai not grow desperate? It's very natural for him to expose some secrets to her."

Xiang Shaolong had learned long ago of the intimate relationship between Dan Meimei and Lao Ai. Deep inside, his belief increased by a few more points. Frowning, he said, "What benefit would assassinating the Crown

Prince bring Lao Ai?"

Wu Fu solemnly said, "In order to assassinate the Crown Prince, there's no need at all for him to use an expert doctor like Mao Jiao. Many of the Crown Prince's aides are Lao Ai's men. What's more, if anything happened to the Crown Prince, everyone would place the blame squarely on Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong nodded. "The situation is indeed as you describe."

Wu Fu saw that Xiang Shaolong was beginning to believe him. He began to grow excited, but lowered his voice as much as possible. "After Meimei spoke those words which aroused my suspicions, she retired to her room. I knew that she was not the type of person who could keep a secret, and that she would go speak to her closest, most trusted friends about it. And so I eavesdropped for an entire night, before I finally learned just a little bit more."

Seeing Xiang Shaolong's eyes grow wide, Wu Fu awkwardly explained, "Xiang Shaolong, please don't misunderstand. It's an old trick to install copper hearing tubes and other eavesdropping devices in the rooms of the courtesans. She doesn't know about it at all. It's fortunate that this was the case, as I otherwise wouldn't have been able to uncover Lao Ai's plot."

Listening to this story, Xiang Shaolong's gaze grew dazed and his mouth became slack. If Wu Fu hadn't personally explained this to him, he would never have realized that when the Four Beauties of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were engaged in 'flipping flowers and overturning islands', someone might be listening with one ear respectfully pressed against the hearing

mechanisms."

Wu Fu continued, "Meimei told her confidante, Xiu Ju, that Lao Ai was going to have Mao Jiao prepare a special medicine which, if taken several times, would cause a person to become stupid and dull, and do nothing but want to sleep all day. As long as the Crown Prince is administered this medicine a few times, it will be very difficult for him to handle the affairs of state during the morning court. By then, the Empress will control all the power of the court. If Lao Ai wants there to be wind, there will be wind; if he wants there to be rain, there will be rain.

Xiang Shaolong was instantly covered in cold sweat.

This scheme really was extraordinarily vicious. The most ingenious part of it was that anyone suspicious about the matter would turn his attention towards Lu Buwei. After all, Lu Buwei had done something similar in the past.

Just as his heart began to tremble, Wu Fu continued, "Actually, Meimei feels something for you as well, great sir. It's only because you paid her no mind at all that her love for you has turned to hate. I've raised her since she was young; ever since she was a child, she's been arrogant and proud. She pays no mind at all to most people. Many people have offered to buy her and give her freedom, but she's refused. But now, it looks as though she has wholeheartedly decided to follow Lao Ai."

At this point in time, how could Xiang Shaolong possibly be bothered to worry about whether or not Dan Meimei is interested in him? Lowering his head, he asked, "Is Yang Yu intertwined with Xu Shang? Isn't she Guan

Zhongxie's woman?"

Wu Fu sneered, "Guan Zhongxie has always considered women to be nothing more than sexual playthings. How could he be bothered to care about Yang Yu? Little Yu has always been a very sentimental person. I think she's more interested in you than in Xu Shang! If you are interested, sir, I can give her to you. Aside from Gui Yan, all four of the women listen to me."

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh. "Don't say these things to intentionally flatter me. Why is it that Gui Yan doesn't listen to you?"

Wu Fu forced out a laugh. "This girl has always been stubborn. Ever since Mo Ao's death, her temperament has totally changed, and she thinks of nothing besides avenging him. She won't even listen to my entreaties. I only hope that you, great sir, won't be bothered to deal with her."

Xiang Shaolong didn't expect that Wu Fu had a benevolent side to him as well. Smiling, he said, "Relax! If I wanted to deal with her, I would've done so long ago."

Realizing that he shouldn't stay here too long, he grew solemn. "I will report this matter to the Crown Prince. When the day of Lao Ai's demise comes, we naturally will not forget this meritorious service which you rendered."

Overflowing with thanks, Wu Fu fell down and prostrated on the floor once more.

Xiang Shaolong pulled him up. Only then did he leave the courtyard to meet

his appointment with Lao Ai.

He couldn't help but feel many emotions at once.

For Lao Ai to act in such a way, he most certainly must have Zhu Ji's concurrence.

It's said that even vicious tigers won't consume their own offspring. Who would've that for her lover's sake, Zhu Ji would be willing to harden her heart and harm her "own son"?

From this moment forward, he wouldn't feel any more guilt towards Zhu Ji at all.

When they reached the private courtyard, Xiang Shaolong ordered Jing Shan and the others to remain outside, while he and Wu Fu strode into the main pavilion.

Six placemats were arranged in two lines within the pavilion. When Lao Ai saw Xiang Shaolong walk in, that treacherous thug revealed a look of joy on his face. He led Pu Hu, Han Jie, Ling Qi, Lao Si, and the others in rising to their feet. All of the accompanying girls instantly prostrated on the floors as well. It was a very grand and solemn welcome.

Xiang Shaolong paused for a moment, sweeping the room with a vigorous gaze. All four of the Four Flowers had arrived. Bai Lei was accompanying Pu Hu, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both by Lao Ai's side, while Gui Yan was seated next to Lao Si. Han Jie and Ling Qi both had different girls

accompanying them. Although they couldn't compare to Bai Lei, they were definitely above-average.

Seeing that they hadn't yet started the banquet, Xiang Shaolong knew that everyone had been waiting for him. Apologetically, he said, "Please forgive me for the sin of being tardy. But please do not punish me with wine either; otherwise, although I'm the last to arrive, I'll be the first to leave."

Hearing his clever, pearl-like words, everyone roared in laughter. Delicate female laughter intermingled with the coarse, heroic laughter of the men, carrying with it an indescribable, intoxicating allure.

Wu Fu led Xiang Shaolong to his seat, next to Lao Ai's. Lao Ai happily laughed, "For Great General Xiang, well-known to rarely appear in houses of lust, to be willing to grace us with his presence gives us ravenous, lustful wolves a great deal of face. How can we quibble about whether or not the Great General arrives late or leaves early?"

Xiang Shaolong sat down. His seat was directly opposite that of the great traitor, Pu Hu. The latter raised his glass. "This toast isn't a punishment, but a congratulatory toast. That night, I lost so much money that I even forgot my old man's name. I forgot to congratulate the Great General for his victory as well! Allow me to offer you this toast in recompense."

Everyone raised their cups in salute.

Xiang Shaolong hesitated for a moment as he suddenly thought of Mao Jiao. If he were to tell himself that he wasn't concerned, he would be lying to

himself.

Wu Fu pretended to bow down, while seizing the chance to whisper, "The wine is fine. All of it is newly opened." Only then did he bow out.

Perhaps it was all in his head, but Xiang Shaolong could feel that the gazes of Meimei and Yang Yu were different from before as they watched him. It seemed as though the gazes weren't just filled with hate, and had love as well.

Putting his cup down, Lao Ai first introduced the two remaining girls. The girl by Han Jie's side was Dan Fu; the girl by Ling Qi's side was Hua Ling. He laughed, "Please don't blame me for trying to monopolize the ladies. Of the two ladies by my side, one of them came here with the express purpose of accompanying you. I'm just taking care of her on your behalf while you weren't here. Now, I'll return her to her proper host. Sir, please take your pick!"

Xiang Shaolong naturally wouldn't treat women as commodities to be traded, but this was simply how people of the age viewed things. Flowers with owners were private property; flowers without owners were commodities to be traded. Thus, Dan Meimei and Yang Yu were both happy to obey, without any intention of disobedience. They even revealed traces of a smile as they gazed at Xiang Shaolong, looking slightly competitive as they awaited Xiang Shaolong's selection.

Xiang Shaolong wasn't sure what to do. It would've been best if he hadn't listened to Wu Fu's words. After he had, he wasn't sure how he should treat



the two girls.

But he knew quite well that although it wasn't necessary to "avoid them like a serpent's tongue", he should still "maintain a solemn, respectful distance". Laughing, he said, "How would ole Xiang dare to seize Official Lao's fortune? For you to have all the beauties to yourself is a very wonderful thing. It would be better if I called for another girl instead."

The two girls immediately put on an appearance of disagreement, even acting like spoiled children with Lao Ai, filling the entire pavilion with just the right aura of spring love. At the same time, they gave face to both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong. They really lived up to their reputations as the two top girls of the place of pleasure.

Pu Hu laughed loudly. "Master Xiang really is formidable! With this masterstroke, he's managed to avoiding both of our girls and causing them to be disappointed. If I, Pu Hu, had known long ago about how talented you were, I wouldn't have made the wrong judgment at your duel, exhausting myself while losing all of my money. I have to rely on Master Ao's financial assistance, now, to be able to afford a bit of intimacy with my dear Little Lei."

After speaking, he gave Bai Lei, whom he held in his arms, a kiss on the lips.

Bai Lei not only refused his advances, she even snaked her arms up his thighs and gave him a hard pinch, arousing everyone's amusement and causing great laughter.

Perhaps it was because he was now aware of Lao Ai's plot, but Xiang

Shaolong simply couldn't connect with the merriment and pleasure at the pavilion. When he thought of how he was back in the 21st century at those places of drunken debauchery, he realized how formidable he'd become.

To this point, he still wasn't sure what Lao Ai and Pu Hu's connection was. Logically speaking, Pu Hu should be Du Bi's man, who in turn supported Cheng Qiao, who had the backing of Madame Xiuli. He should be at loggerheads with Lao Ai, who belonged to the faction of the Empress Dowager. But now, he acted as if he were old friends with Lao Ai, causing others to feel strange.

And Pu Hu's eyes were filled with craftiness and wisdom; clearly, he was a man of ambition who was bold. But the appearance he put on in front of others was that of a lecherous, alcoholic businessman! From this, one can tell that this person wasn't simple at all.

Ling Qi, seated next to Pu Hu, laughed. "Boss Hu is always so humorous. Who doesn't know that your wealth has exceeded that of Qin or Zhao, and is only increasing day after day?" Pu Hu sighed. "When it comes to doing business, how can I compare to the Great General's father-in-law? He's even taken into his possession the territories of Quezhong, Bashu, and Hedong. Even if we ignore his holdings in livestock, his trade in mulberries, flax, fish, plates, copper, iron, and other goods turns enough profit to astonish and frighten. How could a humble, small-time businessman compare?"

Lao Ai couldn't help but laugh. "Boss Pu, you aren't trying to arouse General Xiang's sympathy and have him urge Boss Wu to return his winnings to you, are you?"

At this, even Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but laugh. This man really did have a talent for charming others.

Ling Qi laughed. "Boss Pu's supreme headquarters is in Sanchuan, which has always been the province of Emperors. The others, such as Shangyang, are all too far away. Sanchuan is a fertile, rich province, with huge amounts of commercial traffic and a flourishing economy. Boss Pu, for you to complain in such a way, isn't this the same as the saying, 'Another man's woman is more desirable than your own'?"

These words once more provoked everyone into a round of loud laughter.

Xiang Shaolong secretly raised his guard against Lao Ai's strategic advisor by a few more notches. Just from these few words, one could tell that he was a man with vision and knowledge.

Mao Jiao, whom Xiao Pan had appointed to be a spy, hadn't yet appeared. Most likely, it was because he had arrived too soon and had not yet had a chance to penetrate this inner circle. Only after he harmed Xiao Pan would his situation improve.

At this moment, Gui Yan, who was accompanying Lao Si, let out a sharp cry. It turned out Lao Si hadn't been able to refrain from making a move against her, rubbing her arms and legs.

The Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion were the most famous courtesans of Xianyang. People of slightly lower status would find it easier to enter heaven than to touch a single finger of theirs.

Even powerful officials like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai had to exhaust all of their skills in order to enter their fragrant rooms.

From this, one could tell that the price of their bodies was not an ordinary one. For Lao Si to be so hurriedly lecherous, one could tell that this gentleman was nothing more than a common, vulgar person. The only reason he was able to come here was because of his connection to Lao Ai.

The relationship between Lao Ai and Lao Si was similar to that of Lu Buwei and the deposed Lu Xiong. Appointing one's relatives to a high position was a common act in this day, but it also led to disaster and failure.

Suddenly, Xiang Shaolong felt a sense of regret.

Previously, for a brief moment of joy, he pulled down Lu Xiong. This was an unwise decision. If he remained in the position of City Guard Commander, he could be used to tie down Guan Zhongxie.

When he recalled this, he made a decision to himself, that no matter what, before Lao Ai's fall, he must 'be kind' to Lao Si.

Lao Ai angrily glared at Lao Si before raising a cup in apology to Gui Yan. Only then did this beautiful woman who hated Xiang Shaolong return to being demure and alluring, even though later, she would most certainly curse out Lao Si in front of her sisters.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly thought of Wu Fu's 'precious treasure' which would enable to eavesdrop on the girls. He felt it was both preposterous and

laughable.

In order to improve the atmosphere, Pu Hu sighed, "In terms of business acumen, the Premier Mentor is the real expert. The section on farming in his 'Lu Family Annals' is filled with broad wisdom and tremendous knowledge. It discusses how to fertilize the soil, how to utilize every corner of the field, how to spread out seeds, exterminate weeds, wipe out pests, apply manure, how to properly plow and aerate the soil, and the proper seasons for planting. From this, we can tell that his experience really is remarkable."

Han Jie sneered. "If I had as much money as him, I could put out a 'Han Family Annals' for fun. Right now, Qin is filled with so many people of talent. What can't we produce?"

Xiang Shaolong knew that Pu Hu had no good intentions, and was purposefully increasing the enmity between the Lu faction and the Lao faction. He couldn't help but secretly be covered in cold sweat.

When he came up with their plan to use the 'Five Eternal Elements' to counter the 'Lu Family Annals', he had stopped thinking about the Annals. Actually, the creation of the Annals was an epochal event which had deeply affected the thinking of all intellectuals and philosophers of this era. It was an entire doctrine and ideology, which could best be described as the "Lu Family Doctrine".

Thus, even if Lao Ai's plot succeeded, the person who stood to benefit in the end most likely would still be Lu Buwei, and not Lao Ai.

Under the auspices of the court and the commoners, Lu Buwei could easily generate the momentum to push his power past that of Zhu Ji. By the time he formally took the position of Imperial Regent, based on his influence in both the civil sector and the military sector, great disaster would befall both Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong.

Just as he was pondering all of this and as his mind was swimming across the vastness of the void, a warbling, oriole like voice could be heard. "Great General Xiang, your mind seems to be absent. There is wine, but it moistens not your lips; is your honored self lacking in rest?"

Xiang Shaolong was startled awake and saw that everyone's eyes were on him, while the person who had spoken was Yang Yu, whom Wu Fu has described as very sentimental. Using the opportunity to 'push the boat along with the current', he said, "Last night, I had a few too many cups of wine. Even after I woke up, my head still hurt and my legs were still wobbly...heh!"

Just as he wanted to use this as an excuse to slip away, Lao Ai interrupted, "If Master Mao hadn't been summoned to the palace by the Crown Prince to deal with his illness, we could call him here to take a look at you. Master Mao is an illustrious, famous physician. I'm sure he has medicine to cure a hangover."

Xiang Shaolong was immediately covered in cold sweat.

For Xiao Pan to summon Master Mao into the court, he must be using illness as an excuse to receive a report. But Mao Jiao was a tool which Lao Ai was using in his plot. If, using flowery words or secretive actions, he was able to

deceive Xiao Pan into drinking the poisoned medicine, it would be a calamity.

Although he realized that Xiao Pan was Qin Shihuang, and thus should not be turned into an idiot by others so easily, how could he be at ease, given how difficult it might be to predict certain things? When he thought of this, his heart was so anxious, it felt set aflame. He immediately rose to his feet and saluted everyone present. "Everyone, please forgive me. I just remembered an urgent task which I must immediately deal with."

Everyone stared at him in astonishment.

## Chapter 4

### An Open Challenge to Battle

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Frowning, Lao Ai said, "What is so urgent? Can you order your subordinates to handle it? The banquet hasn't even started yet! And in addition, there is the song-and-dance routine which I specially prepared for you."

Pu Hu also spoke. "Master Xiang, you haven't even warmed your seat yet. How can you leave in such a rush? None of us will let you leave."

Xiang Shaolong secretly cursed at himself. This really could be handled by someone else. Wu Zhuo would be the best person. So long as he sent word to Teng Yi, Teng Yi could then convey the message to Lord Changping. Smiling, he said, "You're right; I became foolish in my urgency. I'll go relay the instructions to my subordinates now. Everyone, please pardon me."

Only then did Lao Ai and the others relax and allow him to go.

Xiang Shaolong strode outside and arrived at the small pavilion where Jing Shan and the others were in the middle of a feast, while flirting with the pretty serving girls who were taking care of them. Wu Zhuo was nowhere to be seen.

At the same time, Wu Guang said in a terrified voice, "Wu Zhuo went to find his old lover. Master, please do not blame him."



How could Xiang Shaolong blame him? He wanted to send Jing Shan instead, but then decided that this would be a good chance to take a walk outside and relax. After finding out where Wu Zhuo had gone, he wanted to leave, but everyone hurriedly stood up behind him.

Xiang Shaolong had never liked a crowd following behind him wherever he went. When he saw them enjoying their feast, he told them to stop following him and slipped out on his own.

When he stepped into the copse of trees outside, he felt reinvigorated. When he remembered that he had a tender wife and loving child waiting at home, while he had to feign friendship with these people at this sort of place, he could only let out a long sigh.

Quite soon, he arrived at the main road leading to the primary courtyard. It was late at night, while he was by himself, and so all of the courtesans and serving girls he encountered assumed that he was just a common man-at-arms and didn't pay much attention to him.

By the time he neared the primary courtyard, he suddenly saw Wu Fu rush towards him without a lantern. His head lowered, he didn't notice Xiang Shaolong at all as he scurried into a small path.

Xiang Shaolong grew suspicious and quickly, quietly followed him.

If he hadn't seen the man scurry towards the bamboo pavilion housing the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion, he definitely wouldn't have followed.

This was because all four of the Flowers were at Lao Ai's banquet. Wu Fu should be busy taking care of the guests. There was no reason for him to head in this direction...unless someone was waiting for him.

Anyone waiting in the boudoir of any one of the Flowers must belong to Lao Ai's people or Lu Buwei's people. Otherwise, who would dare contend with them?

Since Lao Ai's people were all at the pavilion, who could it be besides Lu Buwei's subordinate?

Using the 21st century techniques of the special ops division, Xiang Shaolong closely followed behind Wu Fu and quickly arrived at the bamboo residence.

He could see people milling around the entrance and escorting Wu Fu inside.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt inadequate to the task at hand. Previously, it was all thanks to Han Chuang's assistance that he managed to secretly enter this 'Secluded Bamboo Residence', which all men dreamed of entering. Right now, he didn't even have his climbing hooks. There was no possible way he could enter!

Just as he wanted to leave, a ray of light appeared in his head.

Didn't Wu Fu say that there were a series of copper tubes that allowed people to listen in on the Four Flowers, while they themselves wouldn't know about it?

This probably wasn't a lie, because all Xiang Shaolong had to do was to investigate in order to determine whether Wu Fu was telling the truth or not. This sort of listening device was probably similar to the hollow copper tube listening device installed at Lord Xinling's residence. It couldn't be installed in any of the four rooms, as it would otherwise have been discovered long ago.

But it should also be installed nearby, as the longer the distance became, the lower the transmission quality would be.

Xiang Shaolong no longer hesitated, as he went searching amidst the bamboo. Soon, he found a small storage building within the bamboo grove. Behind it was a tall wall.

He quickly struck a match and became to search the building. Soon, he found a room that was particularly clean that had four large cabinets in it. They looked different compared to all of the other storage cabinets in the building, and were locked as well.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly took out his flying needles. In a short period of time, he unlocked one of the cabinets. Opening the cabinet, he couldn't help but cheer.

He saw a copper tube rise up from the floor, with the end appearing like a small loudspeaker, perfectly positioned for a person standing here to press his ears against.

At least Wu Fu, that brat, hadn't lied to him on the question of the eavesdropping installation.

But this copper tube clearly wasn't connected to the room Wu Fu had gone to, because he couldn't hear anything.

Xiang Shaolong tried opening the other cabinets. By the time he reached the third, he heard a faint sound, and he hurriedly pressed his ear against the tube.

From the sound of it, it was wine cups being clinked against one another.

After a long time, a man's voice could be heard, laughing.

After a person's voice travelled through these copper tubes, it would become distorted and unclear, so for the moment, he could not tell who it was that had just laughed.

Following that, another person said, "The Premier Mentor's plot really is formidable. Although Xiang Shaolong is crafty and suspicious, he wholly fell for my story."

How could Xiang Shaolong not realize that it was Wu Fu who was speaking? He was so furious that he gnashed his teeth.

The other voice laughed, "It's mostly because Boss Wu has naturally good acting skills. That's why this chain-of-pearls strategy the Premier Mentor came up with can succeed. When, in the future, the Crown Prince meets with disaster, no one will think that we had anything to do with it."

Just from the way the man spoke, it was obvious that the man was Guan

Zhongxie.

Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed to himself, "What a narrow escape!"

If he hadn't decided to stealthily spy on the conversation and hear these words, he would have taken a tremendous tumble, one which he might never recover from.

From this, he could also tell that Xiao Pan really was the heaven-ordained Qin Shihuang, whose good fortune was determined by heaven.

Whereas Lu Buwei was only defeated because of luck. Or perhaps it was because this had all been planned out according to the will of heaven.

At the same time, he felt a sense of exhaustion.

Lu Buwei was filled with countless venomous schemes, one after the other. When would he have time for peace?

Only when the Black Dragon appeared.

Lu Buwei's voice could be heard from the copper tube. "Is Meimei still accompanying those bandits?"

Wu Fu laughed. "Premier Mentor, please be at ease. Xiang Shaolong was terrified by my words and will find an excuse to leave early, so that he can inform the Crown Prince. Whereas I have already informed Lao Ai that tonight, Meimei can only accompany him until ten, after which she must

leave. I'll escort her back here at that time."

Lu Buwei coldly sneered. Disdainfully, he said, "This fake eunuch actually dares to fight with me, Lu Buwei, over a woman. I think he's tired of living."

After listening for a while longer, Xiang Shaolong realized that he wouldn't be able to discover anything else. Re-locking the cupboards, he quietly snuck out.

Returning to Lao Ai's pavilion, he saw that Qiu Risheng and the three principal instructors of the Weinan Martial School, Guo Xin, An Jinliang, and Chang Jie had all arrived as well. They sat on four freshly prepared seats. Four more beautiful courtesans had appeared as well, pouring wine for them. In beauty, they were slightly inferior to Dan Xia and Hua Ling, who were serving Han Jie and Ling Qi.

Seeing his return, Yang Yu and Dan Meimei were the first to voice their discontent, while everyone else chimed in, blaming him for having taken so long.

The way Xiang Shaolong felt now as opposed to earlier was tremendously different. He first greeted Qiu Risheng and the others, before willingly accepting a cup of wine in punishment, so as to appease the 'public indignation'.

When Qiu Risheng toasted him, his expression was extraordinarily cold and calm. An Jinliang and Chang Jie showed hints of hostility on their faces as well. Unexpectedly, although Guo Xin was slightly less than ardent, Xiang

Shaolong could feel that Guo Xin was grateful towards him in Guo Xin's courteous toast.

Lao Ai clearly wasn't pleased with the attitudes of Qiu Risheng and his men. He constantly signaled with his eyes, but Qiu Risheng pretended not to notice as the atmosphere immediately began to change.

At this time, Xiang Shaolong noticed that Dan Meimei's pretty eyes, which gazed towards him at times, were filled with a hidden hatred and detestation. He secretly exclaimed that that the power of suggestion really was powerful. Because he had resolved to never believe Wu Fu's words again, his entire impression of her had changed.

Right now, there were eight feasts going on in the pavilion. Only Xiang Shaolong alone was missing a female companion.

At this moment, the food was served. The chopsticks were made of silver, as a guard against people using poison.

Lao Ai said, "Master Hu never comes to visit friends empty-handed. On this trip to Xianyang, he brought several groups of world-class beauties in a song-and-dance troop, so as to broaden our horizons. The primary leader, Shi Sufang, is known as the Lady of Three Perfections, referring to her voice, her looks, and her artistic skill, which have mesmerized the world."

Xiang Shaolong was greatly astonished. From Lao Ai's words, he could tell that this was a travelling group of professional, independent entertainers, not subject or subordinate to any organization. At this place and time, when

everyone is fighting for advantage, how was it possible that Shi Sufang was able to keep their liberty and perform wherever they please?

In this ancient era, aside from the common folk, everyone had a political scheme or plan. Logically speaking, this entertainment group was not an exception. For them to be able to link up with Pu Hu was showed that they were not a simple group at all.

Pu Hu contentedly said, "It took me two months of time and effort as well as a personal trip to Hanye to visit Boss Jin, the master of this troop, and present him with rich gifts before I was able to convince him to take his troop here to Xianyang. I have already arranged for them to put on a presentation at the Spring Sacrifices, so as to liven up the place. We can consider this to be a preview performance."

Qiu Risheng interrupted, "I heard that the 'Lady of Three Perfections', Shi Sufang, along with the 'Soft Boned Beauty', Fu Gongyuan, who performed at the Premier Mentor's residence the other night, and the country of Yan's 'Exquisite Swallow' Feng Fei, are known as the 'Three Legendary Courtesans'. Who would've imagined that two of them would be in Xianyang at the same time? We really are blessed with good fortune."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that the soft boned beauty who had attempted to assassinate him the other night was named Fu Gongyuan.

Of the Three Legendary Courtesans, at least one of them was a remarkable female assassin.



What of the other two?

Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but feel curious.

Lao Ai grinned lecherously. "I imagine that the Premier Mentor has tasted the loveliness of the Soft-Boned Beauty. I wonder if Boss Pu has tried Shi Sufang's 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom, and if he would be willing to reveal a bit to us?"

All of them men roared in laughter, while all of the girls laughed while ridiculing him. They were all used to these men speaking such brazen words and all knew the proper way to respond.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly laughing inside. One of the reasons of Lao Ai's eventual downfall was the fact that he only had these lecherous men as his subordinates.

Pu Hu first laughed alongside everyone else, before responding, "If it was so easy to gain her favor, Shi Sufang would've been taken into someone's private residence long ago. Every time Shi Sufang comes to a place, she always must have a guarantee that no one will force her to sell herself. On this trip, the guarantor is myself. How could I be a mean, contemptible man who will rob what I have been assigned to guard?"

An Jinliang, seated behind Qiu and Guo, was chewing on a chicken leg. He vaguely muttered out, "What a shame, what a waste!"

Instantly, everyone roared in laughter once more.

At this point in time, Yang Yu rose to her feet. Carrying a wine flagon, she walked towards Xiang Shaolong. First her knees touched the floor, before she sat down on his leg. Laughing beautifully, she said, "Master Xiang, please allow your servant to offer you a toast!"

Xiang Shaolong casually raised his glass, allowing her to fill it.

Lao Ai laughed. "Since Miss Yang shows such interest in Master Xiang, then Master Xiang should just accept her. I can guarantee that her 'Three Perfections' in the bedroom is not a whit inferior to Shi Sufang."

Everyone laughed again, adding fuel to the flames. Only Qiu Risheng and the others revealed a look of disdain, showing that he still held a grudge against Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that this charming, mesmerizing beauty was blushing, her head lowered. Even if she was just putting on an act, he still felt deeply moved. This was the normal reaction any man would have towards a beauty. The thought that she might be as venomous as a serpent's fangs added a dangerous, flaming spice to the mixture.

In the midst of the laughter, Yang Yu lifted her beautiful face to gaze up at him through her mesmerizing eyes, before lowering her head again. She lightly whispered, "If Master Xiang is able to find a little free time, Yang Yu is willing to attend to you on the pillow mat."

Those two lines were spoken very softly and delicately. Only Xiang Shaolong could hear them, adding an indescribable spice.

Xiang Shaolong's gaze travelled across her firm, crisp bosom, and almost agreed out of hand. But fortunately, over the past few days, he had been getting up every morning to practice his martial arts, and in the process had fortified his willpower immensely. In a gentle voice, he said, "It is difficult to untie the knots in one's heart. Miss Yang, please forgive me."

Yang Yu's scorching gaze trailed across his face with the hidden bitterness of a young woman thwarted in love, before returning to Lao Ai's side.

Xiang Shaolong voluntarily raised his cup and offered a toast to everyone. Everyone loudly toasted in him return. But in Qiu Risheng's party, aside from Guo Xin, everyone appeared forced, clearly just going through the motions.

Afterwards, Qiu Risheng and Pu Hu toasted each other.

Just as Xiang Shaolong thought that it was strange how Lao Ai was totally unable to control Qiu Risheng, he saw Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng exchange knowing, secretive smiles. In a flash, he understood Qiu Risheng and Lao Ai's relationship.

Qiu Risheng used to be Lord Yangquan's man, who favored Xiao Pan's "younger brother", Cheng Qiao. Now, he still favored Cheng Qiao, but decided to conspire with Du Bi and Pu Hu instead.

Du Bi and Pu Hu's influence was great, but was concentrated in the three eastern provinces. That had become Cheng Qiao's bastion of power.

This was the result of Lu Buwei's handiwork; he had intentionally allowed this

situation to come about, so as to force Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji to rely on him to deal with them.

But Du Bi and the others wanted to make inroads into Xianyang, which is why he had Qiu Risheng and the others pretend to ally with Lao Ai, causing both Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji to be unable to touch them.

The strange, complicated relationship was as simple as that.

Naturally, he wouldn't reveal this precious knowledge which he had suddenly acquired to Lao Ai.

Lu Buwei was playing a game of 'balance of power'. He had no choice but to play along as well.

After gaining this understanding, Xiang Shaolong instantly realized that he had become the primary antagonist for Du Bi, Pu Hu, and Qiu Risheng to attack.

With his death, they could immediately smash apart the balance of power maintained by the various powerful interests in Xianyang.

To Du Bi and Pu Hu, naturally, the more chaos there was, the better for them.

Right now, there were more than a few people in the military command structure of Qin who opposed Lu Buwei. If Du Bi was able to ally with several of the most powerful people, such as Wang He, Wang Ling, Wang Jian, Lord Changping, or Lords An, Gu, and Xi, Cheng Qiao would be in a powerful

position to fight with the ruler which Lu Buwei superficially supported, Xiao Pan.

Once they got rid of Xiao Pan, Cheng Qiao would naturally become the successor to the throne of Qin. And the first thing to do as part of that plan would be to get rid of him, Xiang Shaolong, throwing Xianyang into chaos. Only then, with the waters muddied, would they be able to snatch the biggest fish of all, Xiao Pan.

Right at this moment, he saw Qiu Risheng repeatedly signal to Guo Xin with his eyes. After a long time, Guo Xin somewhat unwillingly said, "Great General, would you be willing to come to our school in the next few days to display your sabre skill to all of us and broaden our horizons?"

The words were the same, but compared to the way in which Guo Xin spoke those words at the Drunken Wind Pavilion the night before the great duel, there was no longer that sense of danger and tension. From this, one could tell that Ji Yanran's kindness and Xiao Pan's promotion of him had moved him at least a little.

When it comes down to it, at this moment in time, Xiao Pan was ascendant and all authority was concentrated in him. In the past, it was Guo Xin decision to follow Lord Yangquan which resulted in him being given no path to join Xiang Shaolong's side. Right now, given this wonderful opportunity, for him to sacrifice it on Qiu Risheng's behalf really was asking quite a lot from him.

Before Xiang Shaolong had a chance to speak, Lao Ai feigned ignorance and said, "Master Guo, haven't you already personally witnessed Great General

Xiang's godlike sabre skills? Why do you insist on seeing it yet another time?"

These words were extremely impolite. Clearly, Lao Ai was extremely unhappy.

Qiu Risheng laughed loudly. "It's precisely because the Great General's sabre skills are godlike, that we want him to go to our school and display it to our children. Inner Custodian, you misunderstood."

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "If tomorrow, Headmaster Qiu is willing to personally enter the arena, then no matter what, I Xiang Shaolong will be at the school to be instructed by you."

After these words came out, everyone's face immediately changed, including Pu Hu's.

Although these words were very politely said, they clearly showed that Xiang Shaolong had the intention of killing Qiu Risheng. And, afterwards, no one would dare to investigate, because Qiu Risheng would have no one to blame but himself.

The reason Pu Hu and Qiu Risheng's expressions changed was because they felt that Xiang Shaolong had already seen through to the real nature of the relationship between them and Lao Ai, which is why he was being so merciless.

The reason Lao Ai and his companion's expressions changed was because based on Qiu Risheng's reputation, after Xiang Shaolong said these words,

even if Qiu Risheng knew that he was going to be defeated, all he could do was stiffen his spine and do battle, without any recourse whatsoever.

Dan Meimei and the other girls were absolutely stunned by Xiang Shaolong's awe-inspiring aura, a heroic spirit seen once in a generation. Their fragrant hearts beat faster.

Qiu Risheng really did raise his head to the sky and laugh loudly, before heroically saying, "In recent years, there hasn't been a single person like Master Xiang, who is willing to exchange a few stances with this Headmaster. Tomorrow at noon, I will respectfully await your presence within the school."

After he was finished speaking, he immediately rose. He bowed towards Pu Hu and Lao Ai before flicking his sleeves and leaving.

Guo Xin and the others had no other choice but to bow as well, before following him out.

The atmosphere in the courtyard immediately became extremely awkward.

Everyone glanced at one another. None of them had expected Qiu Risheng to be so intolerant and so petty. At this moment, his face filled with doubt, Wu Fu walked in, before turning and watching Qiu Risheng and the others depart.

Xiang Shaolong laughed, "Has Owner Wu come to take Meimei away and bring her to meet with the Premier Mentor?"

Lao Ai and Wu Fu's faces simultaneously appeared shocked.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Beauty of Three Perfections**

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Wu Fu's legs went soft, and he collapsed into a kneeling position.

He honestly had no idea what had just happened before his very eyes just now.

All he knew was that Xiang Shaolong had exposed his intentions with a single sentence. As he had a guilty conscience, he felt like a man who was previously wrapped in thick clothes, who had been suddenly stripped naked without a single garment to protect his modesty.

Although Xiang Shaolong had only seen past a single part of his intentions, Wu Fu felt as though Xiang Shaolong knew everything.

Although he hadn't consciously thought of the repercussions, his subconsciousness realized that if his mean, base, contemptible actions were revealed to Xiang Shaolong and the Crown Prince, his entire family line would be exterminated.

Thus, his act of kneeling down sprang from his subconscious mind.

The reason Lao Ai's face changed was because Wu Fu had deceived him.

Earlier, Wu Fu had lied to him and told him that Dan Meimei wasn't feeling



well, and so had to retire early. Naturally, she wouldn't be able to accompany him for the entire night tonight. Who would have imagined that it was a lie, so that she could go and be with the Premier Mentor. This really was intolerable and unforgivable.

Although he thought it was strange that Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was going to accompany the Lu Buwei, his fury surpassed his sense of curiosity.

Only Dan Meimei had guessed a little bit! Everyone else stared at Wu Fu in total astonishment as he knelt there on the ground, not understanding what had happened. Xiang Shaolong said, 'astonished', "Owner Wu, did you do something wrong? As the saying goes, 'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his door at night.' But Owner Wu, you look like the exact opposite. After a single sentence, you knelt down. Why is this?"

Wu Fu was sly, crafty old fox. After calming down, he cursed himself secretly for being cowardly and acting in such a guilty manner. He hurriedly jumped up before coughing drily, "I just lost my footing momentarily and accidentally fell to my knees. I hope that everyone here will not laugh at me."

Lao Ai coldly snorted. "Owner Wu, I'm sure that you didn't come here in accordance with what Master Xiang said, with the intention of taking Meimei to see the Premier Mentor, right?" Wu Fu's fear of Lao Ai was far less than his dread of Xiang Shaolong. He hurriedly said, "That really is the truth. But if the Inner Custodian is not happy, I will go and refuse the Premier Mentor right away." At the moment, Wu Fu was still badly shaken. All he wanted to do was

escape quickly and discover how Xiang Shaolong found out about this affair. One of the possibilities, naturally, was that Xiang Shaolong's men had discovered Lu Buwei's arrival.

Dan Meimei let out a light, bell-like laugh. After dispersing the tense atmosphere, she sweetly said, "Great General Xiang, when you took a stroll outside earlier, did you run into the Premier Mentor?" Xiang Shaolong knew that Dan Meimei was using this method to communicate to Wu Fu that he was not to worry, and that Xiang Shaolong hadn't seen through all their secrets. Just from this point alone! One could tell that Dan Meimei really was on Lu Buwei's side. He calmly said, "I didn't see the Premier Mentor, but my subordinates did see some of his followers, which is why I made a wild guess. How could I have known that it would cause Owner Wu to fall to his knees?" Only now did Wu Fu and the others feel relieved, while Xiang Shaolong laughed inside.

Lao Ai reached out and grabbed Dan Meimei by her slender waist before barking towards Wu Fu, "Owner Wu, do you know how you should proceed?" Wu Fu lowered his head in response and awkwardly left the pavilion."

Pu Hu raised his glass in a toast. "'A man without a guilty conscience won't be afraid if someone knocks on his door at night.' I've never heard this interesting phrase before. General Xiang's words are as precious and marvelous as pearls. Pu Hu offers you a toast!" Everyone had the same feeling and uniformly toasted Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong laughed bitterly inside. He knew that he had once more used a phrase which came from after this period of time. Pu Hu intentionally

repeated those two lines, showing that he had seen straight through Wu Fu's evil designs and guilty conscience.

By this time, everyone was feeling at least a little tipsy. Lao Ai laughed, "Why don't we forget about what is to happen tomorrow, and instead enjoy the astonishing performance of Shi Sufang, one of the Three Legendary Courtesans!" Xiang Shaolong raised his cup in response. "Tonight, there is wine, so tonight, let us drink; if there are troubles tomorrow, then let me worry about them tomorrow. Let's take another cup!" Everyone, including Dan Meimei and the other ladies, held their breath as they awaited Shi Sufang's arrival.

Even Xiang Shaolong was secretly in awe of her reputation as having reached 'Three Perfections', and waited for her with great anticipation.

The troop consisted of eighteen women. They entered as a group, some playing the flute, others beating the drums, causing many interweaving, exotic melodies to be heard at the same time. They danced as they played, their graceful, lithesome bodies pleasing to the eye.

They were all young, jade-like beauties. They wore short sleeved gowns which, when matched with the music and their dance, was extremely mesmerizing.

Suddenly, the music changed. Two rows of eight beautiful dancing courtesans holding dancing fans appeared, wearing a thin, light gauze as they danced their way into the pavilion, through the main door. Their movements were fluid and graceful as their bodies formed all sorts of artificial patterns

and designs. All of the men watching sighed with admiration as they watched.

Although Qin was the strongest nation at this time, when it comes to culture and the arts, how can it compare to the rest of the Six Nations?

Dan Meimei and the other girls were the number one entertainers and dancers of Qin, but when they saw these girls from the eastern dance troop, they couldn't help but feel that they didn't match up.

The most exciting thing was that beneath the gauze could be faintly seen the image of a short-sleeved red dress. Their bare shoulder were as white as snow, their arms were jade-like and their legs as white as powder. All of them men watching stared, their eyes shining. Lao Si, that lustful pervert, was all the more salivating.

Xiang Shaolong seized the opportunity to see everyone's reactions. Although Lao Ai, Ling Qi, Han Jie, and the others had not lost self-control like Lao Si had, they were all stunned as they watched. Only Pu Hu's expression was calm and icy. From this, one could tell that the appearance he put on was totally for the purpose of giving others a false impression.

After thousands and tens of thousands of transformations, the two dancing groups reformed into one large group. Cooning sweetly beneath the eaves of the roofs, they burst out into incomparably beautiful song.

Xiang Shaolong didn't understand a single word of what they were singing. Just as he was pondering, the dancers suddenly flew to the four corners like

butterflies as a woman of incomparable beauty awe-inspiringly appeared right in the middle.

Nobody had seen this beauty arrive, or when she had entered the group of dancers. Only when Pu Hu led them in clapping did they awaken from their stupor and began to cheer as well.

This beauty wore a fresh yellow flowered skirt, and on her feet she wore a pair of embroidered silk slippers. On her head, she wore a hairpin with the seal of a hawkbill turtle! On her ears, she wore a pair of beautiful pearl earrings, while around her powdered neck, she wore a chain of linked pearls. Every inch of her body was shiny and trembled, alongside every movement of her towering, erect, firm bosom! Thin silk streamers covered her slender, graceful arms and legs. Her skin was as white as silk satin, and her body was perfectly proportioned, giving her an irresistible allure.

She had a beautiful, melon-seed shaped face, within which was set a pair of brilliant, pearl-like eyes. Beneath her beautiful dimples was a pair of luscious lips, which looked like they had been painted scarlet red by the hands of heaven itself. She was beautiful, gorgeous, and full of vitality and life, but didn't appear vulgar in the slightest.

Although she sat on the ground and didn't move, her posture alone caused everyone to feel that she was a refined, elegant lady of peerless dexterity. Her long, white neck left the deepest impression on Xiang Shaolong, especially the way she held it up loftily, giving her an incomparably noble, ladylike aura. Even the likes of Qin Qing and Ji Yanran could be considered at most a hair better than her.

The pose which Shi Sufang struck was just like that of the sun beginning to rise in the morning. All of the spectators, male or female, couldn't control the awe they felt for her peerless, world-class beauty, poise, and appearance.

The other dancers had already seated themselves in a circle around her. They gently fluttered peacock fans about her, letting onlookers know quite clearly that she was the real heart and soul of the troupe.

Shi Sufang appeared to be wholly unaware that she had become the center of attention for everyone in the room. She sat as though she were alone in her boudoir. After turning around and showing on a few soul-stirring expressions on her face and in her posture, she slowly began to sing.

From Shi Sufang's red lips came a most graceful, delicate, beautiful voice, which felt like the flying clouds or the running water. Her voice flowed out as though pushed by incessant waves, and the notes seemed to hang and linger in the heavy, silent air. Not only were the notes reluctant to leave; the people listening were unable to leave as well.

Xiang Shaolong was a person who originally knew nothing of music, but in recent years, thanks to Ji Yanran's influence, he had learned a thing or two. Now, hearing her dreary, remote song, a beautiful image appeared in his mind. He visualized a goddess hidden within a secluded valley, bobbing up and down in the waves of the river, passionately singing to her own beautiful reflection in the water. The beauty and emotions evoked by her song was not one whit inferior to those evoked by Ji Yanran with the flute.

The song she was picking came from the poem, 'Picking Royal Ferns', of the

'Book of Odes'. It portrayed the letters and poems kept in the hearts of generals and soldiers as they went entered the field of war, repeatedly singing the words, "Picking royal ferns, picking royal ferns." The next segment portrayed the remembrances and recollections of old generals and soldiers. Nobody could resist the power of that lingering, plaintive melody.

Although her voice seemed both smooth and choppy, solid and vacant, it was extraordinarily clear, and her enunciation was perfect, so that the listeners wouldn't miss a single word. Her voice became fine and delicate once she reached the lines, "When I departed in the past, the weeping willows beckoned to me, as though they were unwilling for us to part. Today I have returned, as the rain and snow falls thick and fast. My movements are slow, for I suffer from both thirst and hunger. My heart is full of sorrow, and you know not my pain." Slowly, her voice died away with the music, drifting off to a place far away, filled with thousands of mountains and tens of thousands of rivers. Just at this moment, the other dancers pressed forward, screening her body with their own until she totally disappeared. Then, as a group, they departed from the entrance way.

Everyone was so moved that they forgot to applaud or cheer.

Xiang Shaolong had been totally enraptured as well, all of his senses lost.

Just as everyone was lost in the throes of a silent daze, a large, forty-something year old man with gaudy clothes walked in. Bowing, he said, "Jin Cheng pays his respect to Boss Pu and everyone else present." Pu Hu, recovering his senses, laughed, "This person is Boss Jin. It's all thanks to his rigorous training efforts that everyone present had the fortune to listen to

that divine, heavenly melody."

Next, he introduced everyone to Boss Jin.

Lao Ai joyfully said, "Someone, give Boss Jin ten taels of gold!" One of his servants immediately gave the gold to Boss Jin.

Xiang Shaolong secretly pondered to himself that Lao Ai must recently have acquired a great deal of money, as he otherwise wouldn't be so free with his gold.

Just as Boss Jin was profusely thanking Lao Ai, Pu Hu delicately asked, "Is Miss Shi feeling well tonight? Could you invite her to come out and chat with us for a short while, so that we might properly thank her for her moving performance?" Boss Jin clearly was used to handling such questions. Intentionally putting on a mysterious air, he said softly, "This girl of mine definitely cannot be rushed. Let me find the proper time to arrange a meeting between her and all of you here. I guarantee I will handle this." Only then did everyone let out a breath.

Dan Meimei and the rest of the Four Flowers of the Drunken Wind Pavilion all had faint looks of disdain on their faces, as though they were contemptuous of the airs that Shi Sufang was putting on. But deep in their hearts, they were all insanely jealous of the way in which she had mesmerized every single person here.

In terms of appearance alone, Dan Meimei really was only very slightly inferior to Shi Sufang. But in singing, she was a large step behind. And when it



came to presentation and image, she was even farther behind. If this was all planned out by Boss Jin's "producers", then Boss Jin really was a formidable person.

Boss Jin turned towards Xiang Shaolong. "This girl of mine has always been extremely arrogant and her gaze has always been high. But she's been quite interested towards Master Xiang. Tonight, after she heard that you were coming, she was extremely happy and even sang her most famous song." Xiang Shaolong hurriedly disagreed modestly. At the same time, he cursed fiercely to himself. Earlier, when she was singing, Shi Sufang hadn't even glanced at him. Clearly, Boss Jin made this claim at Pu Hu's instigation, with the intention of arousing jealousy and envy between him and Lao Ai.

A look of hatred really did flash by Lao Ai's eyes. Laughing loudly, he said, "If that's the case, then Boss Jin only needs to arrange for Miss Shi to meet privately with Master Xiang. Bystanders like us are just ruining the moment for them." Xiang Shaolong really wanted to give Boss Jin two hard slaps, while simultaneously feeling startled at how Pu Hu was able to gain victory without firing a shot, using this evil scheme.

This particularly tactic was more effective against Lao Ai than anyone else.

Lao Ai had always been jealous about the relationship between Xiang Shaolong and Zhu Ji. Thus, these words of Boss Jin struck directly at his most sensitive spot.

Xiang Shaolong turned sideways to glance at Lao Ai and forced out a smile. "Master Lao, please don't take Boss Jin's words to be the truth. I think the

truth is that Miss Shi doesn't care about anyone at all." Lao Ai let out two dry chuckles. Clearly, he still felt uncomfortable.

The happiest person, naturally, was Pu Hu. Raising his cup, he urged everyone to drink.

Boss Jin took the chance to depart.

Shortly afterwards, Wu Fu returned. He brought with him Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, and Xu Shang. They had escorted Boss Jin back as well.

Everyone present felt astonished, and they traded confused glances.

Lu Buwei, arriving at the center of the room, swept all of the guests with his gaze. His eyes alighted on Lao Ai, and he laughed loudly. "I came here today to force the Inner Custodian to drink three cups of wine as punishment." Lao Ai, Xiang Shaolong, and the others all immediately saluted him, as Dan Meimei and the other women prostrated themselves on the floor.

In the past, Lao Ai had always lived under Lu Buwei's tyrannical rule. It was true that he now had the support of Zhu Ji and had flown to higher places. When Lu Buwei wasn't around, Lao Ai could flaunt his might, but when faced with his old patron directly, he seemed to have shrunk in size by half. Haltingly, he said, "Why is it that the Premier Mentor has come to punish this humble official?" Lu Buwei stroked his beard and laughed. "Shaolong, Boss Hu, and beautiful ladies present. You be my witnesses and my judges. Let me enumerate his crimes, one by one, and you tell me if I'm fair or not." Xu Shang shouted from behind Lu Buwei, "Why haven't you poured the wine for

the Inner Custodian yet?" Lu Buwei happily said, "Beauties, be seated!" The ladies all began to sit in accordance with his orders.

Dan Meimei picked up the wine-kettle, while Yang Yu collected a cup. They filled it with wine before delivering it to Lao Ai, who looked like a mouse faced with a cat.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly full of admiration. As soon as Lu Buwei appeared, his reputation and prestige alone was sufficient to cow everyone present, and he totally seized the initiative.

Boss Jin, who had been 'dragged' back, stood besides Wu Fu, his head covered in sweat. He had no clue what had just happened.

When Lao Ai's subordinates, Han Jie, Ling Qi and Lao Si saw that even Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong had fallen silent and were rendered hoarse, they knew that they had even less space to interrupt.

Guan Zhongxie, standing to the other side of Lu Buwei, revealed a trace of a smile on his lips. His manner and bearing was natural and self-composed. No one could tell that he had been defeated by Xiang Shaolong's sabre just a few days ago.

Lu Buwei clasped his hands behind his back. He casually strode forward, stopping directly in front of Lao Ai. Smiling, he said, "The first crime is this: You knew that I, the Premier Mentor, had come to the Drunken Wind Pavilion. And yet, you didn't even come by to greet me. When did the relationship between us become no different than that of two strangers?"

Lao Ai felt extremely awkward. Forcing out a laugh, he replied, "I deserve to be punished! I deserve to be punished!" Raising his cup, he drank the first glass of wine.

Pu Hu, watching Dan Meimei fill the second cup for Lao Ai, laughed loudly. "The Premier Mentor should have punished all of us present with this first cup of wine."

Lu Buwei shook his head and laughed. "How would the Premier Mentor dare to punish Boss Pu? But it's entirely natural and reasonable for me to punish Little Lao. Isn't that right, Inner Custodian?"

A furious flame erupted in Lao Ai's eyes. These words were clearly intended to say that he was a person who forgot other's benevolence towards him. Lowering his head, he said in a low voice, "The Premier Mentor's words are naturally never wrong. But I don't know what the reason is behind this second cup?"

Lu Buwei's gaze fell upon Xiang Shaolong. Smiling, he said, "Shaolong foretells with miraculous accuracy. Why don't you guess first?"

Xiang Shaolong exchanged glances with Lao Ai. Forcing out a smile, he said, "Premier Mentor, you act in unpredictably brilliant ways. How can I possibly predict what the reason is?" Lu Buwei felt extremely delighted. Under everyone's attentive gaze, he began to walk back towards the place where he originally stood. As he reached the main entrance, he turned around and laughed towards everyone, "The second punishment is related to the reason behind the first punishment. Earlier, I ran into Boss Jin and discovered that

Little Lao had secretly arranged for everyone to come here and enjoy the songs and dances of the Lady of Three Perfections. Why is it that Little Lao didn't invite me, Lu Buwei, to partake of this rare opportunity?"

Guan Zhongxie chimed in, "Naturally, I'm not qualified to punish Little Lao, but I still can't help but blame Little Lao for not being a good enough friend."

Lao Ai was mocked by them repeatedly, and in addition, time and time again, they belittled him by addressing him as 'Little Lao', as they had in the past. His face grew very ugly to behold. But unfortunately, at this point in time, his power and influence was still weaker than Lu Buwei's. All he could do was to swallow his rage, forcing it down along with the second glass of punishment wine. Letting out a sigh, he said, "Please forgive me, but this lowly official really cannot fathom what the third glass of punishment wine is for." Pu Hu, frowning, stared at Lao and at Lu. Head in a fog, he clearly didn't understand why Lu Buwei had come to openly humiliate Lao Ai.

Only Xiang Shaolong vaguely guessed the real reason. Lu Buwei had used Wu Fu to try and deceive Xiang Shaolong, so that they might link hands and simultaneously attack Lao Ai. The tip of this spear was really directed at Zhu Ji.

If Xiao Pan and Lu Buwei were to link hands and attack Lao Ai together, even Zhu Ji wouldn't be able to protect him.

Thinking one layer deeper, Lu Buwei clearly was trying to feel out Xiang Shaolong, testing to see if he had fallen for their trick.

When he realized this, Xiang Shaolong's heart was suddenly moved. "If the third glass of wine has to do with Miss Meimei, I would like to ask the Premier Mentor to spare the Inner Custodian and not speak the reason aloud, to the satisfaction of all. Everyone will be able to depart happily to their own homes and go to sleep." This time, it was Lu Buwei and Guan Zhongxie's turn to start slightly. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's words struck home.

Dan Meimei's flowery countenance lost all color. Darting a glance at Xiang Shaolong, she knelt down on the floor, her slender figure quivering.

Lao Ai suddenly realized what was happening. Lu Buwei was about to openly express his intention of taking Dan Meimei as his concubine. If Lao Ai were to continue fighting with Lu Buwei over this woman, he naturally would be committing a grievous sin in betraying the previous benevolence Lu Buwei had shown him by promoting him.

The courtyard became so quiet that even a leaf falling could be heard.

Lu Buwei was, after all, a once-in-a-generation figure. He was able to live and let live. Raising his thumb towards Xiang Shaolong, he praised, "Shaolong remains the most capable! Because of your words, I, the Premier Mentor, shall rescind the third cup of punishment wine." Following this, he coldly shouted, "Meimei, return to your room for now. I shall go visit you soon."

Dan Meimei anxiously glanced at Lao Ai, whose face was as pale and ghastly as a corpse. Lowering her head, she stood up. Suddenly, tears began to flow as she fled from the room.

Han Jie pressed his hand against his sword as he glanced at Lao Ai. Clearly, all Lao Ai had to do was signal him with his eyes, and he would immediately strike.

Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang gripped the hilts of their swords as well, but intentionally did not look at Han Jie, pretending not to see anything.

The hall was filled with a murderous aura.

Lao Ai's eyes flashed with fierce light, but he immediately restrained himself. Sighing, he slowly said, "It's getting late. Everyone should go home and get some rest." Lu Buwei raised his face to the heavens. Letting out a single loud laugh, he then bade Pu Hu and Xiang Shaolong farewell before turning away and leaving, with Guan Zhongxie and Xu Shang following him.

Lao Ai was silent for a long moment, before shaking his head and smiling bitterly. "Right now, I just want to step outside, take a walk, and enjoy some fresh air." Xiang Shaolong also let out a sigh, but it was because he suddenly felt relaxed. The powder keg of Lu Buwei and Lao Ai's opposition to each other had been ignited by the blasting fuse of Dan Meimei, and they would now be openly against each other.

## Chapter 6

### Rays of Light Shooting In All Directions

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Lao Ai and Xiang Shaolong rode out together, their horses leisurely pacing through the ancient streets of Xianyang.

The Eighteen Guardians acted as their vanguard, clearing the road in front of them, while Lao Ai's personal bodyguards followed behind.

Because an assassination attempt had been made not long ago, everyone was on high alert and dared not to be relaxed.

Han Jie, Lao Si, and Ling Qi followed directly behind the two of them, but there was still some distance between them, allowing the two of them to freely exchange their innermost thoughts and plans. The last traces of humility slid away from Lao Ai's face, leaving behind a silent face, frozen like ice.

After riding for the space of time it takes to drink half a cup of tea, Lao Ai, staring at the next street down which was covered in torchlight, said in a low voice, "Lu Buwei really goes way too far." Xiang Shaolong listened to the sound of their horses hooves echo in the silent street. Sighing, he said, "Given the current situation, I would recommend that the Inner Custodian continue to exercise restraint for now! There's no need to directly clash with him for the sake of a woman." Lao Ai ground his teeth. "Brother Xiang, didn't you see that look of helplessness and pain on Meimei's face? Her heart is actually



with me." Xiang Shaolong, recalling the look in Dan Meimei's eyes as she left while crying, couldn't help but imagine her beautiful torso being pressed down by Lu Buwei's foul body. Smiling bitterly, he couldn't give voice to what he wanted to say. With a quiet growl, Lao Ai spoke the words in Shaolong's mind. "I am going to kill Lu Buwei." Xiang Shaolong glanced aside at Lao Ai, just as Lao Ai turned to look at him. After the exchange of glances, Xiang Shaolong said, "Let's not discuss the question of whether or not you can kill him. First, please consider that if Lu Buwei were to actually die, Qin would immediately fall into chaos. Brother Lao, please reconsider." Lao Ai's lips tightened, as though he had tasted something bitter, and he let out a depressed sigh.

In his heart, Xiang Shaolong also sighed.

He really was too sentimental. Even though he knew that Lao Ai was a man who was as rapacious as a wolf and savage as a dog, and was filled with malice towards himself, he still felt pity for him upon seeing him be oppressed by Lu Buwei. He decided that really wasn't the right sort of person to get involved in politics. He was too soft-hearted towards his enemies.

At this moment, they arrived at a four-way intersection. To the left was the Ganquan Palace of the south, while the path in front led to Xiang Shaolong's home. Lao Ai halted his horse, and the entire procession came to a halt as well.

Xiang Shaolong knew all too well that Lao Ai was headed towards the Ganquan Palace, so as to complain to Zhuji while in bed with her. He instantly felt extremely uncomfortable.

With an effort, Lao Ai forced his spirits to rouse. "Brother Xiang, are you intending to kill Qiu Risheng tomorrow?" Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but give Lao Ai a little bit of face on this matter. Smiling, he replied, "Brother Lao, I'll listen to your instructions on this matter." Lao Ai didn't expect Xiang Shaolong to be so willing to give him face. Shocked, he said, "Brother Xiang, you really are a good friend. I know all too well that Qiu Risheng really went too far today. But he still remains slightly useful to me. Brother Xiang, please just teach him a lesson!" Xiang Shaolong calmly said, "I will act as you request, brother Lao." Seizing the opportunity, he asked, "What is the nature of the relationship between yourself and Pu Hu, brother Lao?" Lao Ai frowned, responding only after a long pause. "Right now, he is desperately fawning on me and trying to gain my favor. I don't see any risk in him doing so, which is why I accepted him. This man has an enormous amount of influence in both Qin and Zhao. In the past, he always colluded with Lord Yangquan. Now he is lacking a powerful supporter. After seeing that Du Bi isn't that useful, it's natural that he would look for a different patron." Upon hearing these words, Xiang Shaolong immediately knew that Pu Hu had given Lao Ai many great gifts. He decided not to expose him.

After bidding each other farewell, the two of them went their separate ways.

By the time he returned to the Wu family manor, it was around nine or ten at night. Many rooms were still lit, showing that most people had not yet gone to sleep. Wu Guo was preparing to escort Zou Yan out of Qin. Zou Yan was dearly beloved by every single person in the Wu household. At this moment, Zou Yan was in the main courtyard, energetically discussing the sights they would see on this trip. Listening to him talk, Ji Yanran, Zhao Da, and the others couldn't help but burst into laughter time and time again. He was one

of those people who could take an extremely dull topic and make people very excited and be willing to discuss it. Everyone looked cheerful, while the Tian sisters laughed hardest.

Teng Yi and Shan Lan sat off to one side in a corner, enjoying the friendly atmosphere. Because Jing Jun was on night duty tonight, he wasn't present.

After spending so much time in a backstabbing, deceitful atmosphere, Xiang Shaolong felt his heart grow warm as he returned to this loving, friendly place.

Seeing him return, Wu Guo hurriedly stood up and saluted. "Master Xiang has returned after a night of hard drinking!" As soon as he spoke, everyone present roared with laughter.

Teng Yi stood up. Laughing, he said, "It's late! Let's talk tomorrow!" Everyone departed merrily, leaving only Ji Yanran and the other ladies, Teng Yi, and his wife.

Ji Yanran gave him a glance. "I thought that milord husband wouldn't be returning tonight." Protesting innocence, Xiang Shaolong said, "Worthy wife, did you think that I wanted to fool around with the likes of Lao Ai and his men? But in truth, tonight was a very profitable night." Teng Yi immediately questioned him, and Xiang Shaolong explained all which had happened.

Shan Lan angrily said, "Lu Buwei really is a shameless scoundrel. But Lao Ai isn't exactly a good person either. It'd be best if they both dropped dead."

But Wu Tingfang was interested in something else entirely. "Was Shi Sufang very beautiful?" Xiang Shaolong tactfully replied, "I suppose she's not bad, but how can she be compared to our Fang'er's beauty?" Wu Tingfang immediately beamed with joy and no longer questioned him.

Teng Yi said in a solemn voice, "Third Brother, tomorrow, are you really going to forego your plan of killing Qiu Risheng, all for Lao Ai's sake?" Xiang Shaolong sighed. "Thinking on a deeper level, it isn't a good time to get rid of Qiu Risheng. The more foes Lu Buwei has, the better." Changing the topic, he asked Ji Yanran about how the Black Dragon was proceeding.

Beautiful eyes flashing, Ji Yanran leisurely replied, "With Yanran in charge, milord husband should set his mind at ease." Teng Yi stood up. Stretching lazily, he said, "Everyone should go get some early rest so we will be energetic tomorrow. Tomorrow, we'll go to that failure of a martial school and show everyone that we aren't to be provoked lightly." Zhao Zhi laughed, "Our Master Xiang has now become accustomed to taking a stroll around the Drunken Wind Pavilion before battle. But this time, I think no one will dare to wager that he will lose."

Laughing, everyone retired to their rooms.

This morning, due to Spring having almost arrived and a new year to begin, every household in Qin was discussing financial matters.

Lu Buwei was in charge of handling the national economy, and had prepared a surfeit of documents long ago. A full month in advance, he had submitted a complete and detailed 'national budgetary report'.

Overall, he had increased the national income by increasing taxes, for the purposes of funding large-scale military maneuvers as well as the construction of the Zhengguo Canal.

Over the past few days, Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Changping, and Wang Ling had been engaging in nonstop private talk regarding financial matters. Because Xiang Shaolong knew nothing about finances, and had been preparing nonstop for his battle with Guan Zhongxie, he managed to avoid this unpleasant discuss.

By the time Lu Buwei had finished once more discussing his budgetary report in detail, all of the military and civil officials had been standing for four full hours. Xiao Pan, showing uncommon generosity, had ordered people to prepare sitting mats to allow those present to sit.

After finishing his narration, Lu Buwei energetically said, "The way of finances lies in increasing what needs to be increased and decreasing what needs to be decreased; in using things appropriately. Right now, our great country of Qin is very wealthy. Our supplies of grain are piled as high as mountains, our population is flourishing, the nation is rich and powerful, the commoners are happy, and the nobles are pacified. Naturally, we should increase our revenues by increasing taxes and fearlessly advancing east. Only by continuing our conquests can Great Qin continue to be strong militarily and financially. Ever since the founding of Great Qin, this is the best opportunity for unifying the world." When Lu Buwei sat down, all the other officials immediately followed.

Zhu Ji was definitely not particularly skilled in this area, and so could do

nothing but nod.

Xiang Shaolong could tell that Lu Buwei was secretly suggesting that Qin's present successes were all due to his own hard work. Naturally, Xiang Shaolong didn't wish for Qin to whole-heartedly invade the east. But, since he had no basis of rebuking Lu Buwei, he could only sit in angry silence.

Fortunately, Xiao Pan and Li Si had come to a different conclusion through their deliberations, and so did not express approval.

The likes of Wang Wen and Cai Ze immediately rose up and sang Lu Buwei's praises, claiming him to be a brilliant statesman and a master warrior. Xiao Pan lightly said, "Left Premier, do you have any opinions?"

Lord Changping roused himself and stood up. Moving to the center of the hall, he faced the royal dais, upon which sat Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, and Lu Buwei. "Ever since Xiaogong defeated Chu and Wei, our great country of Qin has expanded our territory vastly. We have dominated Sanchuan to the east, and incorporate the territories of Ba and Shu to the west. To the north, we have tended to the Shang prefecture. To the south, we have taken over Hanzhong, pacified the nine barbarian tribes, and have restricted the movements of Zou and Chu. Meanwhile, the other six countries continue to eye us suspiciously, concerned about the rise of Great Qin. And more recently, we have taken over the three eastern provinces. Our goal right now should be to increase the prosperity of the people and consolidate our holdings. Moreover, right now, the Zhengguo Canal is costing us a large outlay of funds. A large number of farmers have been drafted to assist in the construction of the canal as well, which means their farmlands now lie barren and unused. With regards

to the matter of increasing the taxes, I would like to ask the Crown Prince to consider thrice before acting."

Before Xiao Pan had a chance to express his thoughts, Wang Wen sneered, "Left Premier, your words are in error. Great Qin is a land of abundance and plenty, easy to defend and easy to launch attacks from. To the left of the central plains are the territories of Zuowei, Han, Youlong, Shu, and Woye, which are very fertile and rich. To the south, we have the fertile grounds of Ba and Shu, while to the north we have our vast grasslands. All three of these sides are guarded by tough defenses, while the opening to the east is heavily fortified and our soldiers there well-stocked and equipped. The cost of building the Zhengguo Canal is but a drop in the bucket of our finances. The territories of Ba and Shu are more than enough to cover its costs. Crown Prince, please inspect my words for truth."

Meng Ao added, "Ever since the days of King Zhaoxiang, our Great Qin has spared no effort in advancing eastwards. Not only have we seized large swaths of territory belonging to Zhao, Wei, Han, and Chu, we have also exterminated over ten million enemy soldiers in hundreds of large battles and have greatly weakened the combat strength of the eastern kingdoms. Right now, we can see that in the Six Kingdoms, the commoners are poor, the ancestral clans are weak, and the governance is chaotic. At such a time, when they are weak and we are strong, when Great Qin holds an advantage in geography, weather, manpower, and force, if we were to waste this priceless opportunity, how could we face the late King?" Xiang Shaolong, seeing Lord Changping's face change color several times, knew that things weren't looking good.

Although Lord Changping was resourceful and full of intelligence, but in terms of experience, how could he be a match for the likes of Lu Buwei or Wang Wen? There would come a certain point or time in a debate when he would be unable to come up with an effective retort.

The annual budget which Lu Buwei presented today really was an effective and carefully thought out plan for seizing more power. Lu Buwei had a wide amount of discretion when it comes to collecting tax, and by increasing taxes, his control over the army's budgeting would increase as well.

As soon as Xiao Pan and Zhu Ji approved, Lu Buwei would be able to do as he pleased to benefit himself and harm others. Generals like Huan Yi would have to defer to his desires all the more.

Xiao Pan could perhaps maintain control over the three military commands in Xianyang, but all the armies outside of Xianyang would naturally fall under Lu Buwei's sway.

Thus, he absolutely had to contest this.

Lord Changping was silent for a long time, then suddenly laughed loudly. "Would Lord Li Si please come and present your findings to the Crown Prince."

He actually called Li Si to the front.

Xiang Shaolong and Xiao Pan immediately relaxed. They knew that this was the best tactic to use in a time when one had no strategies available.



As the Senior Historian, Li Si normally should only be fit to act as Xiao Pan's secretary-general and handle his letters and documents. But now that Lord Changping had called on him by name, it would be hard for others to object.

Wang He and Wang Ling were military officials. They were outstanding when it comes to questions of warfare and leading armies, but when it comes to politics and economics, they were far from being a match for the likes of Lu Buwei and Wang Wen. Just like Xiang Shaolong, they were unable to assist.

Only Li Si, this minister who would be legendary for thousands of years after his death, would be a suitable opponent.

Li Si was secretly elated. He gladly stepped forward towards the dais to speak in Lord Changping's stead. After paying the proper respects, he said with an air of confidence, "The unification of the world is the national strategic objective of Great Qin. No one holds any doubt about this. Right now, if this administration were to angrily rock the boat, if we aren't careful, the entire ship will capsize and all hands on board perish. Misfortune can quite easily heap upon misfortune, which is why we absolutely cannot be hasty. We should first observe the common sentiment, then act accordingly." Cai Ze clearly held Li Si in contempt. With a somewhat disdainful air, he said, "This old minister, under the instructions of the Premier Mentor, has done a full investigation of every single prefecture in Great Qin and has assigned taxes according to local conditions. We definitely won't act rashly. The Senior Historian really worries too much."

Still beaming, Lu Buwei said, "Lord Inner Historian, if you were to personally inspect my proposed budget, you would understand that this budget which I,

the Premier Mentor, have presented to the Crown Prince, is a thoroughly researched, all-encompassing budget which has cost countless man hours for accuracy's sake. Great Qin's future fortune lies within this budget. Would the Empress and the Crown Prince immediately approve it, so that we may begin our work immediately." All of the officials their chimed in with approval.

Lord Changping and the others immediately began to frown mightily.

Only Xiang Shaolong remained calm and unhurried, knowing that Li Si would definitely have a brilliant counter response.

Li Si really did smile naturally in response. "The so-called 'understanding of the public sentiment' must be grounded in fact and evidence in order for others to be convinced. According to the Premier Mentor's intentions, out of all the prefectures, Shu and Ba would have the most severe taxes. But that absolutely must not be the case."

Lu Buwei didn't expect that Li Si would dare to openly dispute with an old business boss like him. Face changing, he unhappily said, "Taxing the rich heavily, taxing the poor lightly. This is the basic, golden rule of finance. Ba and Shu are wealthy, abundant areas. Great Qin should take some of their wealth and spread it around the world. Senior Historian, why do you say such a thing?"

Li Si wasn't the slightest bit frightened by his severe words and fierce countenance. Remaining calm and composed, he said, "Ba and Shu are not just the base upon which Great Qin grows. They are also a critical strategic region. If our armies there follow the Min River south, within five days, they

can arrive at the capital of the Chu kingdom. It is a critical region for any campaign to consolidate the southwest or attack Chu. In order to consolidate and strengthen our rule over Ba and Shu, we must administer it in accordance with the situation on the ground and rule with a benevolent, gentle manner. But this humble official cannot see this important point in the Premier Mentor's budget." After pausing for a moment, he began to speak with even stronger points. "You must know that although Ba and Shu have abundant natural resources, there is a relatively small amount of people living in that wide expanse of land. Many parts of it still engage in simple, slash-and-burn cultivation of farmland. If we were to suddenly increase their taxes, I'm afraid that the people there might not be able to withstand the additional pressure, resulting in less revenue despite the increased tax rate. Furthermore, there are many barbarian tribes in Ba and Shu who are formidable warriors and who love to give battle. If popular sentiment were to be roused against us, even if we were able to quell any uprising, it would cost us greatly and increase their hatred towards us. It would be better if we were to lower the tax rate and cause the people's hearts to turn towards us. This would be the best plan. In this humble official's opinion, having a strong and stable footing in Ba and Shu is more important than any economic considerations. Would the Crown Prince, the Empress, and the Premier Mentor please consider my words."

Xiao Pan's royal gaze immediately gleamed with light. Lifting his voice, he said, "Li Si's words are reasonable. We should first enrich the people before we take money from them. This really is correct. When considering the question of struggling for supremacy in the world, what does one or two years matter? What's more, the amount of money being spent on the Zhengguo Canal is significant, and can in no way be described as a mere 'drop

in the bucket'. If we were to exhaust the resources of the two regions of Ba and Shu! It will cause public sentiment to turn against us, at which point, We really would be unable to face our late royal father." Xiang Shaolong secretly exclaimed at the brilliance of it all.

The power of Li Si's argument came from him changing the discussion from economics to military strategy. Although he had focused all of his ammunition on just that single point, he caused listeners to feel as though the entire budget proposal was riddled with holes, and that it did not really take public sentiment into account.

And Xiao Pan definitely would not fail to live up to his reputation as the world-conquering Emperor of the future. Following the opening which had been given, he used the excuse of the Zhengguo Canal's construction to repudiate Lu Buwei's plan to increase taxes. After he spoke in such a way, aside from a limited number of people such as Lu Buwei, none of the officials present dared to object any further.

Lu Buwei still hadn't had a chance to speak. Li Si continued, "With regards to the three eastern provinces, although a tax cut is proposed, that will not be enough to satisfy the populace. In this humble official's opinion, it would be better if we lightened the local laws and punishments. Right now, Great Qin doesn't suffer from a lack of punishments, it suffers from punishments being too heavy. A person who steals a single coin is punished severely, and anyone who doesn't report the crime suffers the same penalty. The crime is light, but the punishment is heavy. Why must the punishment be so heavy? In places like Ba, Shu, and the newly conquered provinces, imposing such harsh punishments will only cause the people's hearts to harden against us. This

will be greatly disadvantageous to our plan of unifying the world." This discussion had already ranged far astray from Lu Buwei's budget recommendation, but it was firmly on track regarding the question of unifying the world. This clearly came from Li Si's long pondering and was not something which Lu's clique could match.

A ferocious, ugly light flickered in Lu Buwei's eyes repeatedly. Just as he was at a loss as to what to do, Li Si continued to speak. "In a rich nation's strategy, no matter how many transformations and changes there are, none of them should change the original goal. All strategies should be aimed towards that goal. Places like Ba and Shu have much land but few people. But if we were to sway the people's hearts and promote commerce or subsidize farming, there is a great chance that those two places will flourish. Only then would Great Qin be able to use its resources in our aim to unify the world, without destroying the resource in the process." Xiao Pan was ecstatic over what he heard. Slapping his table, he expressed his admiration. "Li Si's words are extremely correct. Do my other ministers have anything else to say?" Lu Buwei and the others were caught totally unprepared. Staring at each other, they did not know what to say, as no one had expected this. Lao Ai left his seat and knelt down, respectfully saying, "Lord Li's wisdom can be considered to be greater than that of Lord Shang Yang himself. This humble official audaciously dares to request the Crown Prince to make an exception and, with the Premier Mentor's concurrence, restart the budgeting proposal process with Li Si at the head. Crown Prince, please consider my suggestion." As soon as he finished speaking, the entire palace was filled with an uproar.

Only Xiang Shaolong understood that Lao Ai was helping them now out of a desire to avenge the three arrows which Lu Buwei had shot at him last night.

Lu Buwei's fierce eyes flashed with angry light as he glared at Lao Ai, wanting to do nothing but rip Lao Ai apart with his teeth and swallow him.

Only now did Wang Wen and the others come to realize the normally low-key Li Si's brilliant, awe-inspiring tactics.

This was the first time since he arrived in Qin that Li Si had lifted his head up and spoken forcefully, exposing his unusual spirit, showing exactly how he would, in the future, guarantee himself a political influence which couldn't be diminished.

How could Xiao Pan not understand the opportunity? He immediately asked Zhu Ji for her advice.

Although Zhu Ji felt that it was greatly inappropriate to openly whittle away Lu Buwei's authority in such a manner, she couldn't not support Lao Ai. Nodding, she said, "Royal son, do as you see fit." Feeling extremely gratified, Xiao Pan happily said, "Li Si, immediately begin carrying this task out. After doing so, prepare two copies, one for Ourselves, one for the Premier Mentor. We will confer with the Premier Mentor first before discussing this in audience." Xiang Shaolong secretly praised this decision. Although Xiao Pan was clearly diminishing Lu Buwei's influence and authority, he was also giving Lu Buwei a face-saving retreat.

At this point, everyone's gaze fell upon Lu Buwei as they wondered whether or not he would accept this.

Lu Buwei clearly knew himself to have been bested in oral arguments, as he

couldn't come up with anything to refute Li Si's points. But he still remained a wily old fox, and he actually laughed freely. "Lord Senior Historian, you absolutely live up to the Premier Mentor's expectations. You have accomplished a great deed in the service of Great Qin, and should therefore be rewarded. Why don't you come to my residence, where I will put you in charge of handling taxes and revenues, and thus allow you to do all that you are capable of doing." Smiling, Xiao Pan said, "The Premier Mentor's words are very correct. But we have, for quite some time, had another position in mind for the Senior Historian. During the Spring Sacrifices, I will make it public." Then, he said in a loud and clear voice, "Today, we'll stop here for now. All other affairs shall be tabled until tomorrow. Court dismissed!" Xiang Shaolong, waking up, only now realized that noon, the time of his duel with Qiu Risheng, had long passed.

This day at court had been unusually exciting and unusually long-winded. It had lasted for nearly five full *sichen*, or approximately ten full hours.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Experts Converge**

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Xiao Pan had just won a beautiful victory and was in high spirits. He invited his closest officials to join him for lunch, and aside from Huan Yi, who had to leave Xianyang early and was unable to participate, even Teng Yi and Jing Jun, who had been miserably waiting outside the palace for Xiang Shaolong to join them and cause trouble at the martial arts school, were invited.

Wang He, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen, Li Si, and the others were naturally the guests of honor.

The lunch banquet was hosted at the inner halls of the imperial palace. Without Zhu Ji present, Xiao Pan could act as he wished, and was extremely happy.

After the servants finished pouring the wine and bringing the dishes, he immediately shooed them out, so that everyone present could speak freely.

After Xiao Pan and the guests whole-heartedly congratulated Li Si, it fell to Xiang Shaolong to clearly and in great detail discuss the events of the previous night.

When he heard about the games which Lu Buwei was playing, Wang He suddenly grew furious. "It sounds as though the accusations which the departed Lu Gong and Xu Xian made regarding Lu Buwei's involvement in the



death of the late King were not baseless after all. He now wants to return to his old tricks. Why don't we gain the initiative by launching a preemptive strike and kill that traitor, Lu, and wipe out all of his traitorous supporters. Crown Prince, please permit me to do so!"

Xiao Pan let out a sigh. "If this matter could be handled so easily, We would have long since summoned him to the palace and executed him. But right now, Lu Buwei's supporters are strong and numerous, and the likes of Du Bi and Pu Hu are waiting on the sidelines, eyes gleaming like hungry tigers. If chaos were to befall the city, Du Bi and the others would collude with outsiders to cause trouble. The three eastern provinces would immediately become difficult to keep. The most dangerous person of all is Meng Ao. So long as he maintains his military command, it will be difficult for us to act rashly."

Wang Ling, ever steady and reliable, concurred. "At this point in time, the best strategy is to wait for the Black Dragon's appearance, while supporting Lao Ai against Lu Buwei. The tactic of 'painting a picture with two brushes at once' is the best strategy."

As he spoke, he saw Li Si frantically winking at him. Only then did he realize his mistake, and his face turned as gray as ash.

Wang He, naturally, said with astonishment, "What do you mean, the Black Dragon's appearance?"

Xiao Pan had previously issued a stern command, that no one was to divulge the Black Dragon's existence. Now, as Wang Ling realized that he had

exposed the secret, he was so terrified that his face turned pale.

Xiao Pan laughed, "Minister Wang, don't be too worried. But I'll only give you this free pass once."

Wang Ling sighed in relief, immediately kneeling down and apologizing for his mistake.

Seeing Xiao Pan's authority increase day by day, Xiang Shaolong was both frightened and exhilarated. Even he himself could not clearly describe what he was feeling.

Xiao Pan personally explained to Wang He about this matter. Overjoyed, Wang He praised Xiang Shaolong, "Only Shaolong could come up with such a brilliant plan that is both exacting and actionable. Using Lao Ai to counter Lu Buwei is even more unspeakably brilliant. Just now was proof of this approach's brilliance. In the future, no matter how great Lao Ai's influence becomes, in the end a castrated dog remains a castrated dog. Unlike Lu Buwei, he cannot win the hearts of others. Even if he grows two additional heads and sprouts two more sets of arms, he won't be able to escape this old general's hands."

Wang He was the general who, aside from Meng Ao, controlled the greatest amount of power. Naturally, he didn't hold Lao Ai in high regard.

Lu Buwei's power came from the fact that he had strong influence in both the civil side and the military side. Without a suitably complete plan to dispose of him at the proper time, things would become extremely chaotic. And when it

comes right down to it, Lao Ai is nothing more than Zhu Ji's boytoy. Getting rid of him wouldn't result in any real repercussions, there would just be a period of struggle and turmoil. Especially now that Xiao Pan had assigned Mao Jiao to spy on him, what damage could he possibly do? Lord Changping coldly snorted, "Qiu Risheng is the real root of the problem. Shaolong, you are free this afternoon anyhow. Although you've promised Lao Ai not to kill him, it'll be easy for you to diminish his prestige."

Up till now, Xiang Shaolong still didn't understand the importance of the martial arts school, and so he seized the chance to ask.

Wang Ling replied, "The turbulence this school is causing was invited into Xianyang by Lord Yangquan from the country of Chu. They specialize in swordsmanship, and they serve in the employ of high officials and ministers. For warriors, they serve as a shortcut for gaining riches and glory, and thus they are flourishing quite well. There are many ministers and officials who have sent their children to the school to learn. Shaolong, in your battle with Qiu Risheng, you must be careful. For him to sit so securely as the headmaster of a school with so many different swordsmen is no mean feat, and requires real skill."

Everyone agreed, raising their glasses and drinking merrily. Their conversation turned towards the subject of the Three Legendary Courtesans. Chatting and laughing, by the time they finished the meal, Xiang Shaolong was totally full. How could he possibly be bothered to go hunt down Qiu Risheng and start punching and kicking him, without even being allowed to kill him? Happy and satisfied, he returned to his government office.

When Xiang Shaolong entered the room, he saw Lao Si there. Teng Yi was in the process of unhappily yet politely listening to him talk. When he saw Xiang Shaolong, he hurriedly disappeared.

When Lao Si saw Xiang Shaolong, he said in a fawning manner, "This humble one comes at the request of his elder brother, who asked me to invite the Great General to the Inner Custodian's Residence to enjoy a dinner banquet together."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly crying out for his mother. Could it be he would have to face Lao Ai for another goddamn night? He immediately wracked his brains, trying to find an excuse to decline.

Lao Si crept closer, putting on a mysterious air. "Tonight, my elder brother invited the Lady of the Three Perfections, Shi Sufang, to go to his manor for drinks. Naturally, he couldn't exclude you, Great General, from the gathering!"

Xiang Shaolong's mind immediately went blank, as a confused buzzing sound filled his mind. No matter how much he might want to deny it, he was moved.

There aren't many men in the world who would be able to resist the allure of rarely seen women of unparalleled beauty such as Shi Sufang or the "Soft Boned Beauty", Lan Gongyuan, even if they were in the position of enemies. Xiang Shaolong was no different.

Naturally, Lao Ai wouldn't be so generous as to allow Xiang Shaolong the

chance to become intimate with Shi Sufang. There must have been some sort of condition which Shi Sufang had attached, such as his presence being necessary for her to be present as well. When he came to realize this, he couldn't help but feel immensely proud of himself.

The only issue was that he had just spent the previous night dawdling around at the Drunken Wind Pavilion. If he were to go visit Shi Sufang tonight, what would his tender wives think?

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. "I thank your brother for his kind intentions, but I do not have the good fortune to attend. Tonight, I must stay at home to accompany my wives. Please inform your brother that I, Xiang Shaolong, consider him to be an excellent friend indeed!"

A small smile on his face, Lao Si appeared extremely disappointed. Clearly, Xiang Shaolong's guess wasn't far off the mark.

After failing in his mission, Lao Si could do nothing besides leave.

Xiang Shaolong suddenly felt a strong sense of longing for his tender wives and beloved son, and so hurriedly returned home.

Ji Yanran returned home at about the same time that he reached the Wu residence. She had just returned from the river, where they had performed a drill on the 'appearance' of the Black Dragon in two days time.

The Tian sisters happily bathed them and changed their clothes. Their gentle, charming care was difficult to describe.

By the time he began to luxuriate in the light of the setting sun with his beloved wives and son in their garden, Xiang Shaolong had long since forgotten all about the matter of Shi Sufang, casting it beyond the highest heavens.

Perhaps he was getting old, or perhaps he had suffered too many deadly, life-and-death setbacks. Right now, he desired nothing more than the feeling of being together with his family and enjoying life with them.

As he engaged in idle family gossip with his three beloved wives, Ji Yanran, Zhao Zhi, and Wu Tingfang, as he watched Tian Zhen and Tian Feng play with Xiang Bao'er, who had just learned to walk, he felt a sense of joy which could not be replaced by anything whatsoever.

Wu Tingfang, having perhaps heard the news from the Guardians, knew that there had been a dispute in the morning court session and began to ask questions.

Naturally, Xiang Shaolong wouldn't hold anything back from them. He described everything which happened that morning in court, and even told them how he had declined the opportunity to feast with Shi Sufang tonight.

Surprised, Wu Tingfang said, "Beloved Xiang, aren't you afraid of offending Lao Ai as well as that beautiful woman whom every man wishes to get close to? After having witnessed the Soft Boned Beauty, Lan Gongyuan's good looks, I too would like to witness the artistry and skill of Shi Sufang."

Xiang Shaolong was sitting in the courtyard with his three wives. Every so

often, the laughter of Xiang Bao'er and the Tian sisters would drift into the courtyard from the soft grassy terrain of the garden. His heart was filled with bliss and contentment, and he said whole-heartedly, "As long as a single one of my three worthy wives are willing to be with me, I, Xiang Shaolong, am wholly contented. Heaven is so kind as to allow me, such a trifle of a man, to have three celestial maidens from heaven as my wives. How would I, Xiang Shaolong, dare to ask for anything more?"

All three tender wives trembled lightly, their beautiful gazes flashing brightly with a loving flame.

Zhao Zhi, her heart enchanted and her soul intoxicated, said, "A husband such as this, what more can one ask? Every day I am with beloved Xiang feels like the first day we fell in love. Ah! I am so happy, I don't know what to say."

Ji Yanran sighed, "A pity that sister Qing has left for the prefecture of Shu. If she were here, this moment would be even more perfect and flawless. I really wish that milord husband would never have to go off to war again. The taste of parting is really indescribably bitter."

In accordance with Qin military law, when an army is mobilized, no soldier is allowed to bring his spouse or family. And thus, marching off to war is what wives fear the most.

Thinking about the cruelty of war, Xiang Shaolong couldn't help but let out a sigh.

Wu Tingfang moved closer to him. Seating herself within his embrace, she

circled her arms around his neck. "Beloved Xiang, you didn't keep your appointment today. Qiu Risheng is sure to brag and claim that you are afraid of him!"

Ji Yanran also sidled over. Leaning against his tiger-like back, she said softly, "Anyone who has seen our Great General's "Hundred Battle Sabreplay" knows that Qiu Risheng just had a stroke of unbelievably good luck. Hmph! I, Ji Yanran, already showed mercy to Guo Xing, but these people still don't know what's good for them. When milord husband goes to the martial arts school, Yanran will go as well!" Invigorated, Xiang Shaolong boldly said, "Then after tomorrow's morning court, why don't we go to their school to settle accounts!"

Just as Wu Tingfang and Zhao Zhi were both exclaiming in approval, Ji Yanran let out a cry of dismay. "It has to be later! The Crown Prince asked me to go to the imperial palace tomorrow for his reading lessons. Alas! Since sister Qing isn't here, I have to be her replacement. I hear that sister Qing is very strict with the Crown Prince, but I cannot! It's far too much work for me to scrunch and stiffen up my face like that."

Only now did Xiang Shaolong discover that Ji Yanran had been given the title of Grand Tutor.

At the same time, he felt very touched.

Although Xiao Pan never expressed it, in reality, the longing he felt for his departed mother, Lady Ni, was a source of deeply engraved pain in his heart. He needed a replacement for her, and first, the replacement was Zhu Ji.



Then, it was Qin Qing.

Now, it was Ji Yanran.

Otherwise, based on his current intelligence, how could he possibly need others to give him reading lessons?

Wu Tingfang kissed Xiang Shaolong on the side of his face with her soft, fragrant red lips. She gently kissed all across his face, making him feel indescribably comfortable as he listened to his beautiful, tender young wife say, "Husband Xiang, did you know that Sister Qing owns a very large business in Ba and Shu? Sister Qing is extremely competent when it comes to business."

Xiang Shaolong knew nothing at all about Qin Qing and her history or background, all he knew was that she came from the royal family. Surprised, he pursued this line of question.

Ji Yanran knew more about this than anyone else, so she explained. "Sister Qing originally came from a major clan in Ba, which owned a major cinnabar mine. Cinnabar can be used for medicinal or chemical purposes. Their wealth accumulated over the centuries. By Sister Qing's generation, the Qin family has become the richest family in the Ba prefecture. Hoping to foster cordial relations with their family, the Qin royal family had one of their royal scions propose marriage to Sister Qing. Unexpectedly, right after their wedding rites were completed, her husband was sent on a military mission and died in foreign lands. In order to avoid getting entangled with other nobles, Sister Qing returned to Ba prefecture to focus on the family business. She did

resoundingly well, and when the Crown Prince returned to Qin, Lady Huayang recommended her to return to Xianyang and become the Grand Tutor for the Crown Prince. And then, she met you, you affectionate lover, who entangled her in the web of love once more.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong understand why Qin Qing’s personal status and stature was so unusually high. It wasn’t due solely to Lady Huayang and Xiao Pan’s affection towards her; it was also because she had the powerful backing of a mighty clan in the Ba and Shu prefectures.

It was just as Li Si had stated. When dealing with exceptionally large and powerful prefectures such as Ba and Shu, the only acceptable policy was one of conciliation.

At the same time, he began to understand why she had been so close with Lady Huayang, this noblewoman who had come from the kingdom of Chu. Ba and Shu were, after all, located next to the borders of Chu. A rich and powerful family such as the Qin family would naturally have thousands of connections with the Chu royal family.

Whoever married Qin Qing would not only obtain this beauty of a hundred charms and a thousand fascinations; he would also gain access to her enormous family fortune. Who wouldn’t grow red-eyed with desire at this prospect? This was why Qin Qing didn’t dare to be with him openly.

Although Qin Qing became a royal kinswoman via her marriage to the royal family here in Xianyang, her marriage was nonetheless a matter filled with political implications.

Just as his thoughts were flying about, Wu Guang came to report that Guo Xing had come looking for him.

Xiang Shaolong let out a sigh. Leaving the pavilion, he first lifted up Xiang Bao'er and kissed him on his face, before handing him to Tian Zhen as he went to the main hall to meet Guo Xing.

Guo Xing was drinking tea. Upon seeing him, he actually knelt down and kowtowed thrice, frightening Xiang Shaolong so badly that he hurriedly lifted the man up. "Mr. Guo, you honor me far too much!"

After the two sat down, Guo Xing smiled uncomfortably. "This lower official originally came with evil intentions to meet you on this trip."

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that Guo Xing had the desire to capitulate to him. But by now, he had learned to not easily trust others. Smiling, he said, "Assistant Commander, have you come to cause misfortune upon me, on Headmaster Qiu's orders?"

Guo Xing was clearly in the midst of a spat with Qiu Risheng. Coldly snorting, he said, "On what basis would he dare to cause misfortune to you, lord? Today, because milord was busy with morning court and did not show up, he put on an appearance of being disappointed, but everyone could tell that he was relieved of a heavy load. He even took the opportunity to go boar-hunting with Pu Hu. We all knew that it was because he was afraid that Lord Xiang would go a'knocking on his door. After viewing the prowess of Lord Xiang's "Hundred Battles Sabreplay", who would have the courage to dare and try to stroke Lord Xiang's tiger-whiskers?" Surprised, Xiang Shaolong

said, "Then why would he instigate you to come see me?"

Embarrassed, Guo Xing said, "To tell the absolute truth, we all used to work for the second prince, and the school's expenditures continue to be paid for by Pu Hu. Were it not for him, with Lord Yangquan's demise, we would have had to shut down long ago. But superficially, we must appear to be subordinate to the Lord Inner Custodian. Lu Buwei has tried to seize control over the school several times, but each time, the Lord Inner Custodian has used all his strength to resist."

Sighing, he continued, "Lu Buwei is very crafty. He enticed many of our warriors to his side, then hinted both openly and obliquely that the court wouldn't make use of any of the people we have trained. He wore us out and caused us to suffer shortages of funds. It wasn't until the Lord Inner Custodian aided us that we were able to stabilize our footing and have a short reprieve."

Xiang Shaolong knew that he wasn't too sure of the relationship between himself and Lao Ai, and thus spoke of Lao Ai in a cautious, respectful manner.

Naturally, he wouldn't reveal the real situation to Guo Xing. Nodding, he said, "Brother Guo, what are your future plans?"

Guo Xing once more fell to his knees, calling out, "In the past, Guo Xing did many unforgivable deeds against Lord Xiang, and also used shameful, despicable means to injure Lord Jing. I deserve a thousand deaths. I only hope that in the future, I can atone for my misdeeds by performing meritoriously and be allowed to wholeheartedly serve Lord Xiang. If so, I will

be able to die without any regrets.”

After having been taught a lesson by Wu Fu, Xiang Shaolong would never again fully trust someone just because of a few words. First, he lifted Guo Xing up, before saying, “Brother Guo, please feel free to speak your mind, and don’t do anything like that again.”

Guo Xing excitedly said, “Ever since that day when Talented Lady Ji showed me mercy, I, Guo Xing, have been thinking about this. Right now, everyone in Xianyang knows that Lord Xiang’s sense of righteousness reaches the heavens, and is extremely considerate to his men. Lord Xiang, please allow this humble one to follow you!”

Forcing out a smile, Xiang Shaolong said, “Is my reputation really that good?”

Guo Xing said, “Lord Xiang, you had two chances to become Premier, but easily gave those chances up. You promoted Li Si, Huan Yi, and Lord Changping, and showed great benevolence to those followers who came with you from Handan. You righteously rescued Prince Dan of Yan. Your good deeds are too many to enumerate. We’ve been quite aware of all these things this entire time. But because my personal desires and greed had closed my eyes, I only truly awakened after the Talented Lady Ji’s spear thrusts. I only hope to be able to follow Lord Xiang and no longer need to worry about fighting and fawning for favor from others, and what’s worse, worry that tomorrow, that person will sell me out.”

After Xiang Shaolong seriously contemplated his words, he nodded. “Fine! I’ll do as you wish, but you had best remember that I’m not an easy man to

deceive. If I feel that a single word passes from your lips which are insincere, I will immediately kill you without any hesitation.”

Overjoyed, Guo Xing once again knelt on the floor.

Xiang Shaolong had him lift his head up and ordered him to sit down again. “Earlier, it seemed as though there was something you wished to say to me. What is it?”

Guo Xing’s expression became solemn, and he said in a lowered voice, “What I’m about to tell you is the result of my own observations and guesses, because I’m not qualified to join the secret meetings held by the Headmaster, Du Bi, and Pu Hu. But due to the many tasks they have assigned to us, I was able to guess a large part of it.”

Xiang Shaolong was a person who had experienced many calamities. Quite calmly, he said, “Speak!”

Guo Xing said, “I believe they have made a complete set of plans for the second prince to take over the Crown Prince’s position. The critical point is the three eastern prefectures. Although Pu Hu is a native Qin, he has always been zig-zagging between Qin and Zhao. When we consider how wealthy and powerful his family, and the fact that he is linked to both the Qin and the Zhao royal families by intermarriages, he has deep-rooted influences in both countries. If it weren’t for his support, the second prince would definitely not be able to thrive as he has.”

Xiang Shaolong came to a sudden realization.

Just like how Xiao Pan was the unique resource of Lu Buwei, Cheng Qiao was the unique resource of Pu Hu, the leader of yet another wealthy merchant family.

In previous years, no one could have imagined that Xiao Pan would return and forcibly seize the position of Crown Prince. This is why Pu Hu, Du Bi, and Lord Yangquan had constant fawned upon Madame Xiuli and Cheng Qiao.

Who would have thought that Xiao Pan would successfully escape Zhao and return to Qin, immediately shattering their beautiful dreams.

At first, perhaps they continued to hold Lu Buwei, this rich merchant, in contempt. Only after Lu Buwei had caused Lord Yangquan's death did they know that the situation had taken a dramatic turn for the worse. But they had no place to turn. Their only avenue of escape was to retake the imperial seat.

If Xiao Pan's court was as stable as Mt. Tai, it would naturally be very hard for them to succeed. But fortunately, the court was splint into the Crown Prince faction, the Lu faction, and the Lao Ai faction, three centers of power. Thus, Pu Hu and the others were in a position to cause trouble.

Guo Xing continued, "Pu Hu's most dangerous tactic is his collusion with Zhao's Great General Pang Nuan, who is arrogant in his power. Although I don't know the particulars, from the way the Headmaster speaks, Pang Nuan is in the process of secretly coordinating with the three eastern prefectures, the country of Chu, and the country of Yan to disrupt Lu Buwei and Tian Dan's secret treaties, while simultaneously assisting the second prince in

ascending to the imperial throne. We can imagine how important it is for Du Bi to cause an upheaval in Xianyang. If Lu Buwei made any sudden moves, it would be even better, as that would definitely cause Qin's military force to splinter into multiple factions. At that time, he would openly raise the banner of the second prince with the Zhao army's assistance. His power would be greatly different than it is now."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly proud of himself. His musings from long ago were quite similar to that of Guo Xing's. The only thing he hadn't thought of was the possibility that Pang Nuan would once again try to build a coalition of Chu, Yan, Zhao, Wei, and Han.

At the same time, he felt a little wounded at heart. Although Li Yuan, Lord Longyang, and Crown Prince Dan all professed to be as close as brothers to him, in this situation, where kingdoms faced off against each other, not the slightest bit of decision-making being affected by personal relationships could be tolerated.

Reality is always cruel.

Guo Xing said in a low voice, "To cause upheaval, the best thing to do is to assassinate you, Lord Xiang. Everyone would put the blame on Lu Buwei's head. You can imagine what the results would be."

Xiang Shaolong smiled. "There's definitely quite a few people who want to kill me!"

Guo Xing solemnly admonished, "Lord Xiang, please don't take the threat too



lightly. Pu Hu and Pang Nuan have prepared for quite a long time now. They have recruited a gang of strange warriors and have also trained warriors in all of Zhao's assassination techniques. They have been smuggling these people into Xianyang in groups. I personally escorted three of them in. There are all first-class experts. One of them is known as the 'Barefoot Immortal', Kou Lie. He is the most extraordinary expert which Chu has produced in over twenty years. Just from the way he puts on his shoes, one can tell that he is determined to assassinate you, Lord Xiang, even if it costs him his life in the process."

Xiang Shaolong felt a cold shudder pass through him. How could one enjoy life if, every day, he had to worry about a suicidal assassin being after him? He asked, "Does Pu Hu's dancing troupe also have assassins hidden within?"

Guo Xing said, "There should be. But my knowledge is limited, and I cannot say for sure."

Xiang Shaolong said, "The three people you escorted, do you maintain contact with them?"

At the same time, he felt that for Chu to send an assassin to come here to slay him, they must have obtained Li Yuan's permission. Could that mean that Li Yuan also wished to kill him? His heart became ill-at-ease, and he didn't dare to follow that line of thought any further.

But he couldn't help but begin guessing again. It wasn't a big deal if Li Yuan were to want to kill him. But if Lord Longyang were also to desire his death, it would be very difficult for him to accept that.

Or perhaps these actions were the individual actions of individual swordsmen!

Guo Xing replied, "After I brought them within the city, they went their own ways."

After pausing, he said, "Several unfamiliar faces appeared at our school as well. They follow the Headmaster all day long. They seem to be experts who are hiding their real identities."

Xiang Shaolong secretly sighed to himself that this was an example of "Another wave arising, before the first had calmed."

Right now, Qin had become the public enemy of all of the eastern kingdoms. Since they couldn't win on the battlefield, their only option was to incite internal unrest. This was the same way modern history operated as well. There were no differences.

Guo Xing said, "Today, I came at Headmaster Qiu's orders to arrange another appointment for the duel. However, it is for fifteen days in the future. I think that he expects that his death-squads will be able to assassinate you before then."

Xiang Shaolong said, "Then go tell him that it will depend on what sort of mood I'm in. Hah! Aren't you worried that they will get suspicious due to you having stayed here this long?"

Guo Xing laughed. "I'll just tell them that Lord Xiang was putting on airs and

made me wait here for an hour! After I go back, I'll find out what I can about the assassins, then think of a way to give the information to you."

Xiang Shaolong clapped him on his shoulders. "Isn't notifying me a very easy thing? Come report in as my assistant, quickly! You are, after all, my assistant commander."

The two laughed loudly at each other. Only then did Guo Xing joyfully depart.

Returning to the inner courtyard, he explained the situation to his three tender wives, telling them to be careful when they went outside. Ji Yanran said, "Their target isn't actually you. It's the Crown Prince. Claiming to be attempting to assassinate you is nothing more than a smokescreen for the general public!"

Xiang Shaolong was suddenly, violently shocked awake. "I'm such an idiot. If they were to kill the Crown Prince, they would immediately cause real unrest, and Cheng Qiao would be able to openly, honorably take the throne as his successor."

To be honest, he actually became more relieved, because if Xiao Pan were to die, then Qin Shihuang would disappear from history, and China would probably not arise.

Ji Yanran said, "We must seize the initiative in this matter. The problem is that the City Guards are tightly controlled by Guan Zhongxie. Otherwise, it would be much easier to act."

Just as Xiang Shaolong was pondering his next move, one of his Guardians came to report that Lao Ai had personally come to visit him.

Just as Xiang Shaolong's face twisted in distaste, Wu Tingfang laughed and said, "If you can't turn him down, then just go through the motions for tonight! All of us have our utmost faith and trust in husband Xiang."

Sighing, Xiang Shaolong went to meet Lao Ai.

## Chapter 8

### The Three Legendary Courtesans

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Lao Ai stood in the middle of the hall and with him were Han Jie and four of his personal guards.

Tao Fang was playing host to them and retreated into the inner hall when Xiang Shaolong arrived.

Lao Ai sighed, "Shaolong, how can you not treat me like a friend?"

After Xiang Shaolong greeted Han Jie and the rest, he pulled him aside and whispered, "It's better that I don't touch this type of beauty. Last night that Boss Jin deliberately hinted in front of both of us that Shi Sufang was interested in me. He's obviously trying to make Brother Lao jealous and put me on the alert. That's why I had to decline tonight's meeting. Does Brother Lao understand my kind intentions?"

Lao Ai was stunned for a moment before he blushed and said, "I didn't think of that point. Hei! At the most Shi Sufang is just a difficult courtesan to get into bed, how can she possibly sow any discord between us. Brother Xiang, do not be overly suspicious."

Xiang Shaolong knew very well that he doesn't mean what he said but he did not expose him. Instead he said quietly, "In my opinion, this is Pu Hu's devious plot. You must not belittle pretty women, for they can bring down a

country. Da Ji and Bao Si are examples of a fine specimen who can bring downfall upon a country and sometimes they are even more formidable than an army, and they can be almost impossible to guard against. In my opinion, if I attend the feast at your residence, Shi Sufang will certainly pretend to be attracted to me and at the same time flirt with Brother Lao. If we are not mentally prepared, what do you think will happen?"

Since Lao Ai is pretending to be a man, of course he cannot give up his deception halfway and he stubbornly continued, "Shaolong, do not worry. I, Lao Ai, can be considered one who grew up among flowers and I've met all kinds of women. If she try to entice me, I naturally have my own ways to deal with it. I guarantee that our relationship will not be strained because of her. Ha! Why don't we use her as a competition, to see who can get his hands on her but without any jealousy involved. This will spoil Pu Hu's plan. If we can win her heart, we can find out instead what secret collusion Pu Hu has."

Xiang Shaolong secretly finds this amusing and knows that Lao Ai is ultimately not a man made for great things for he cannot control his own sexual urges. He chortled and said, "This is the reason why I have to reject Brother Lao's drinking invitation tonight so that Brother Lao can expand all your efforts to get Shi Sufang in your hands."

Lao Ai sighed, "Of course I won't blame Shaolong now. It's just that Shi Sufang openly declared that she will only attend the feast if Shaolong is around. With her temper, won't it be a damper on the occasion if she were to leave."

Xiang Shaolong said with a straight face, "See! This is exactly Pu Hu's trap

waiting for us to be hooked. So what do you want me to do?"

Lao Ai replied with some embarrassment, "I wish even more that Shaolong can make a trip. Let's see what tricks Shi Sufang can come up with. Maybe I can even drug her a little and turn the tables on Pu Hu instead."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly cursing him for being despicable but then he remembered that he too had made an unsuccessful attempt to drug the Empress of Zhao, Han Jing so he dared not curse Lao Ai too much. Because the truth is, Shi Sufang is indeed up to no good. He said, "If it's so easy to get her, she would have been toyed with by many others already. A woman like her who is in the business will naturally have her ways of handling such matters. If she exposes the plan, it'll be worse instead."

Lao Ai pulled his sleeve and said, "Time is running out, Shaolong come with me quickly!"

Xiang Shaolong was unable to resist his 'warm offers' so had no choice but to follow him.

After they left Wu Residence, the direction they were travelling in was not towards Lao Ai's Department of Interior Affairs. Xiang Shaolong enquired in surprise and Lai Ai replied with a sigh, "When I found out earlier that Shaolong refused to come, I tasked someone to inform Pu Hu and asked him to subtly find out Shi Sufang's intentions. Never did I expect that she would immediately reply that she won't be coming. Hei! So I had no choice but to come and beg for Shaolong's help. Now we're going to Du Bi's General Residence in Xianyang. As to whether Shi Sufang will agree to see us, it's still

an uncertainty.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that men are really naturally worthless scamps. The more a beautiful woman acts high and mighty, the more they feel she’s a rarity. Lao Ai has always been popular amongst women and now that he has met someone like Shi Sufang who totally disregards him, he’s feeling an intolerable itch instead.

The more he interacts with Pu Hu, the more he feels that this person really has formidable tricks.

After all his years of struggles since coming to this ancient warring period and with the knowledge regarding this period’s history he gleaned occasionally from the talented Ji Yanran, Xiang Shaolong is no longer as ignorant as he once was when he first came to this era.

And because he came from the 21st century, all the more he can look at everything in this era from an objective angle.

The appointment of Overlords in the San Jin and the Reforms of Shangyang can be considered the biggest change of this era right now, with the changes coming fast and furious. Even the 2,000 odd years following this, other than the terrible times China suffered after the Opium War, it’s difficult to find another period in history that can be compared to this.

In this period of great changes, the various Dukes of the Spring and Autumn Period first got rid of feudalism and established the Seven Warring States where the Overlord will hold power. Most importantly, the few areas which



has started to expand during the end of the Spring and Autumn Period, like the growth in industry and commerce, expansion of cities, intensification of wars, sudden popularity in new knowledge, liberation in thinking has become even more remarkable during this period.

The most influential thing that appeared during this era is the emergence of huge enterprises.

This emerging transnational social class, because of their abundant financial backing, is able to travel far and wide, gaining experience and knowledge and with their huge social network, their influence on the political arena is incomparable.

The most outstanding one is of course Lu Buwei, collector of rare artifacts and talents. There are others, like his own Grandfather-in-law Master Wu, Guo Zong who made his fortune from the iron smelting business, and Pu Hu, who is now secretly plotting to overthrow Xiao Pan. They are all great businessmen turned politicians who can control the world.

Even Qin Qing, she was able to stay independent while protecting her chastity and gaining the respect and admiration of the Qins because her clan owns a major cinnabar mine and she is of Qin Royalty. Any other ordinary girl, with her beauty, would already have become some rich and powerful man's mistress.

And to handle the competition between war and politics, the scholars and fighters slowly went their own different ways and everything became professionalized.

Wang Yu and Li Si are two very good examples. If their positions were exchanged it's a guarantee that Qin politics will be in turmoil and the Xiongnu will kill their way to Xianyang soon.

The popularity of professionalism swept through the lands and to the soldiers, the soldiers of the Warring States period is no longer like the soldiers of the Spring-Autumn Period, who are just conscripted farmers made to take up arms.

This resulted in the emergence of associations like Weinan's Warrior Public House, where there are martial artists and military tacticians abound for the employment of Rulers.

Therefore, regardless of external wars or internal conflicts, the level of intensity and complexity is nothing that the past can compare with.

The reason why Xiao Pan is able to unify the 6 states in future is because out his unique background, for he does not have the offensive habits of those heirs who were brought up by women who lived in the palace. That's why he is able to shine and control the world in this great era of constant changes.

But a talent like him is also a rarity in this world, such that after his death, there was no one else who has the ability to suppress the others. That's why the Qin empire ended after the second generation.

While he was deep in thought, they have arrived outside the gates of the General's residence situated at the west of the city.

By now Xiang Shaolong is also craving for another look at Shi Sufang again. The lure of a beauty is indeed extraordinary. Although he knows that she is up to no good, he can't help but want to get close to her.

This is exactly the most formidable part of Pu Hu's plan.

A successful businessman will always know how to guess his buyer's thoughts, and this fact has remained since time memorial.

In the middle of the great hall was a square table and surrounding this square table there were six seats.

Xiang Shaolong prefers such seating arrangements where everyone is seated around one another as it's more conducive and close-knitted for chats.

Du Bi personally invited Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han Jie into the hall while the rest of the guards stayed outside, where they will be welcomed by others.

Du Bi's attitude is extremely warm, a rare change which makes one unable to imagine that his attitude used to be frosty and aloof in the past.

Naturally Xiang Shaolong knows what he's thinking about.

If they are really are able to assassinate Xiao Pan, or successful in shifting the blame to Lu Buwei, then they will try to fight for the support of Xiang Shaolong and his men because by that time Cheng Qiao would have become the legal successor.

By then, Wang Chi, Wang Ling etc will have no choice but to support Cheng Qiao.

As for Lao Ai, firstly he is still of value now and secondly, Du Bi holds no regards for him at all. Like Wang Chi, he does not believe he's capable of doing anything great, so he just flattered him together with the group.

Lao Ai is most concerned about whether Shi Sufang will be attending the feast so he asked, "Miss Shi..."

Du Bi interrupted with a laugh, "Lord Interior Minister do not worry, Master Pu has gone to speak with Miss Shi personally. Hai! A woman's heart is indeed unfathomable. Actually she has a good impression of Lord Interior Minister as well, it's just that she's a little vexed that Master Xiang would stand her up so she was just putting on some airs! Lord Interior Minister please do not be offended."

Now that Lao Ai has regained some dignity, his confidence is slightly restored and he's suddenly more relaxed.

Right at this time Pu Hu returned and from a distance away, made a hand signal to show that all has been arranged. Du Bi hurriedly invited everyone to sit down, leaving the seat between Xiang Shaolong and Lao Ai empty. Obviously that seat is being kept for Shi Sufang.

The pretty maids first served wine and food, followed by beautiful musicians whose music brought life to the gathering. A number of swirling dancers came out, their movements fluid. A pity that Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai and Han

Jie were not here for this and thus were not in the mood to enjoy.

After the dance, the dancers and musicians left the hall, leaving only six elegantly dressed beauties to serve wine and all of them were above average in looks.

Other than Lu Buwei, all the other royalty and officials of Xianyang cannot be compared to Du Bi.

Han Jie asked in passing, "What business does Master Pu has in Xianyang?"

Pu Hu laughed, "With Shaolong's father-in-law around, there's no place for me here at all."

Everyone knows that he's joking and Du Bi said with a laugh, "This old friend of mine, when doing business, is as good as Yi Yin and Lu Shang's stratagems in governing a country, Sun Wu and Wu Qi's military tactics and Shang Yang's reforms. One is so impressed that one is rendered speechless."

Pu Hu said humbly, "And you call yourself my old friend, trying to flatter me against your conscience. But when it comes to business, there are three whom I respect the most. The first one is Shaolong's Grandfather-in-law, master Wu. The horses and cattle he raises are so numerous they cannot be counted by per head, but measured by per valley. Secondly is Bai Gui of the state of Wei, who runs the grains and silk-screen industry. In times of famine, it's easier to borrow grains from him than to take loans from some other states. Thirdly is Yi Dun, the salt in his warehouse is enough to last everyone in this world for a few years. As for Lu Buwei? He's still not considered up to

par yet.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought “Here it comes!”. Pu Hu’s formidable point is his subtlety. Words like these which deliberately demean Lu Buwei were uttered beautifully and convincingly.

Han Jie said with a smile, “But Lu Buwei is indeed someone who knows what to invest in. Once he makes a right bet, he will enjoy the fruits endlessly.”

Everyone knows what he was referring to and all chortled loudly.

Ever since Han Jie stood out that night at Lu Buwei’s feast, he has been keeping a low profile, as if he’s afraid to steal Lao Ai’s thunder. But in reality, his wisdom and air is something that Lao Ai cannot be compared with.

Xiang Shaolong asked nonchalantly, “Isn’t Master Pu an expert in investment as well?”

Pu Hu replied with a wry smile, “Master Xiang please be gracious, do not pour salt into my wound again. This time I’ve really lost badly. If I’d known, I would have learnt from Zhong Sunlong from the state of Qi and become a loan shark instead. If I can just employ someone with half the capabilities of Master Xiang to collect the debts, I can guarantee that money will come rolling in. Then I can avoid the danger of meeting a gambling expert like Ling Yue.”

This time, even Xiang Shaolong can’t help but laugh. The glib tongues of businessmen are really different from others, their expressions are more

lively and interesting.

Lao Ai is only concerned about Shi Sufang and asked, “Is Miss Shi not coming?”

Du Bi replied with a smile, “My lord, do not worry. The prettier a woman, the more difficult she is. Even though Miss Shi is staying in my residence, but up until now I’ve only seen her twice. A meal taken at the same table like what’s happening today is the first time for me! And I have the three of you to thank for it!”

Lao Ai, on seeing that a great Qin general like Du Bi is buttering up to him as well, felt privileged and hurriedly held his wine cup up in a toast.

Xiang Shaolong pretended to drink but in fact, not a single drop of wine touched his lips.

Pu Hu exclaimed in surprise, “Does Master Xiang find the wine not to your liking? I can instruct my men to change it to another type of wine.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “If Master Pu had just been attacked only a few days ago, I’m afraid you’ll behave like me as well and control my drinks.”

Pu Hu was about to reply when Lao Ai’s eyes brightened as he looked straight ahead at the entrance.

Everyone followed his gaze and looked towards the same direction, and including Xiang Shaolong, all of them were instantly dumbfounded.

Shi Sufang, under the accompaniment of two maids, swayed elegantly into the hall.

The more distressing fact is that she looked as if she has just bathed and changed. Her shiny black hair was just bundled up at the top with just a wooden hairpin to secure it. She was without make-up, wearing only a thin, white and short silk top with sleeves so long that it reached the back of her palms, revealing only her slender fingers. On the bottom she was wearing a plain yellow long skirt, so long that it was trailing on the floor. She wore no other adornments but still looked a hundred thousand times better than any other women who may not look as good as her but dressed in finery and make up.

Everyone can't help but stand up, and can't help but feel ashamed of themselves.

Shi Sufang's expression was aloof as she moved to Xiang and Lao and sat down between them. Only then did everyone else regain their senses and sat down with her.

Lao Ai brushed off the pretty maid who was coming up to serve her and poured the wine for her personally instead. It seems that once lust took over his soul, he has long forgotten the warning that Xiang Shaolong gave him.

Xiang Shaolong could smell the fresh scent on her body after her bath and can't help but remember the intoxicating time when he first met Ji Yanran after her bath. He was suddenly jolted awake and at the same time saw that while Du Bi is equally head over heels, Pu Hu has been secretly keeping a



watch on him. His heart turned icy as he realized that he must not underestimate this flamboyant and experienced businessman.

Man's ambition is never satisfied. Lu Buwei excelled in business and became rich and this exactly represents Pu Hu's mindset, which is why he can ignore a beauty in his hands.

Du Bi has always harbored unhealthy thoughts towards Ji Yanran, so naturally he is unable to resist the shocking and exotic charms of Shi Sufang.

Shi Sufang thanked Lao Ai quietly and slowly turned the crystal clear drink. Not only Lao Ai, all the rest felt as if their souls were being eaten.

Lao Ai had been pining for her arrival but once he was seated beside her, his glib tongue is now suddenly tied and he's at a loss for words.

Shi Sufang offered everyone a toast, then turned towards Xiang Shaolong and asked nonchalantly, "Why is Master Xiang suddenly available again?"

Xiang Shaolong was a little startled by her clear gaze and he lifted his cup with a wry smile as he replied, "I do not wish to give a false answer to Miss Shi's questioning so I can only punish myself with a drink. Would Miss please let me off the hook?"

Pu Hu chortled, "If Miss Shi knows that Master Xiang is risking his life to drink this wine, she'll certainly be touched."

After Xiang Shaolong had a hearty drink, he put his cup down only to catch a

glimpse of excitement flash past Shi Sufang's eyes before she averted his eyes. She badgered Pu Hu to clarify his earlier words and after Pu Hu's explanation, Shi Sufang said happily, "It was Sufang who was rude, I'll have a drink with Master Xiang then!"

Saying is one thing, doing is another thing. On seeing that Shi Sufang's attentions are now all on Xiang Shaolong, Lao Ai jealously tried to make her drink with him.

Du Bi said with a laugh, "Hold it! Our Miss Shi has a rule, at every feast, she will only drink three cups of wine. Now she has already drunk two, Master Lao must treasure it."

Lao Ai was even more annoyed but he dared not make himself appear loutish so he can only give a dry laugh as he tried to compliment her on her music instead.

Shi Sufang listened to him, showing neither approval nor disapproval but when Lao Ai's flattery became too exaggerated, she just smiled lightly and it was enough to make this wily old lecher start itching but there was nothing he could do to her.

Han Jie's sword skills may be excellent but in this instant, he is of no help at all.

When Lao Ai started talking about how Shi Sufang's dance and song is so excellent that no one since time memorial can compare with, Shi Sufang guffawed and replied, "Lord Lao's compliments are really too kind. Compared

to sages of the past, Sufang's song and dance is just decadent performances, only good enough to help sirs relieve some boredom. The music and dance of past sages are significant to the peace and stability of a country, and has been marked by Confucius as one of the Six Arts. It is not something that a woman like me can be compared with."

Lao Ai's knowledge in this area is limited and he can only smile along in consternation, unable to continue the conversation further.

In this area, Xiang Shaolong is even more ignorant than Lao Ai and he was secretly surprised, having the slight feeling that Shi Sufang's certainly is not of simple background.

Shi Sufang asked calmly, "Has anyone heard of this story? After the death of King Wen of Chu, he left behind a beautiful wife. Master Yuan wanted to seduce her but as he had no access to her, he built a guest house next to her imperial abode. Everyday he'll arrange for extraordinary dance performances, hoping to lure her out. One day, she finally came out and Master Yuan thought that his lure had worked."

Once she came to this point, she spoke no further, leaving a cliffhanger behind.

Her speech was fluent and lively, with pauses at all the right moment. Even Xiang Shaolong was engrossed in her story, much less for Lao Ai.

But this beauty has a unique style and extremely prickly, not someone who gets along easily at all. In front of her, it's very easy for one to feel inferior.

Du Bi said with a sigh, “Of course the widow of King Wen was not tempted, I’m afraid Master Yuan has been snubbed.”

Du Bi can’t help but try to show off a little in the face of a beauty so that he can get into her good books.

The only thing that can be said has been said by Du Bi and there’s no chance for Lao Ai to interject or agree.

Xiang Shaolong was secretly alarmed. Lao Ai is completely under this beauty’s control now and now if she tries to show attention to him, it will mean that she is only interested in him and that will certainly incur Lao Ai’s jealousy, thus spoiling the good ‘honeymoon’ period he is having with Lao Ai.

Han Jie said with a smile, “Miss, please have mercy on us and tell us the ending of the story!”

Shi Sufang’s clear and alluring eyes swept past the crowd as she continued gently, “The lady cried, ‘My late husband’s intention of holding dances was to prepare for battle. Now Master is not using it to deal with our enemies but instead using it on those who are not yet dead, isn’t that strange!’ On hearing that, Master Yuan was so ashamed that he immediately brought 600 war carriages and attacked the state of Zheng.”

Everyone was stunned. Her story is subtly hinting that her own songs and dance are just decadent pleasures, not worthy enough for the admiration of others. The hidden meaning is profound and yet filled with a twinge of sadness, making one immediately change his impression of her. It’s very

difficult to just imagine her now as an ordinary courtesan with outstanding musical capabilities.

Pu Hu laughed loudly and his laughter took away some of the awkwardness in the air. He said, "Miss Shi's wisdom is indeed a refreshing change from the current fad, I am much enlightened."

Shi Sufang's pretty eyes turned towards Xiang Shaolong as she asked offhandedly, "I wonder what topic all of you were discussing before I arrived?"

Xiang Shaolong was still slowly savoring Shi Sufang's story, thinking about the hidden meaning behind this tale that this unfathomable beauty has spun. He was jolted awake on hearing her and can't help but scratch his head and said, "Hei! I think it's something about businesses!"

Everyone see his bewildered expression and chortled.

Shi Sufang covered her mouth and smiled, her behavior genteel as she said, "Then this topic must have arisen because of Master Pu."

Lao Ai was intensely jealous on seeing this and interrupted, "Miss's predictions are absolutely correct."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly lamenting. Once Shi Sufang appeared, she has gained control of the whole event. People like Lao Ai who is usually so glib and always good for an argument can now only try to interject a few words in between her conversations whereas he himself is at a loss for words. This is

the first time he's met a woman like that.

Du Bi added with a smile, "Boss Pu mentioned that there are three businessmen he admires the most, namely Master Wu, Bai Gui and Yi Dun. I wonder which three men would Miss Shi admire the most?"

Shi Sufang covered her mouth as she smiled, "With so many talents here, how can it be my turn to express my thoughts? Why don't we ask Lord Lao to start first!"

Lao Ai was staring at her so intently that for a moment he had no idea what Du Bi and her was talking about and was awkwardly dumbfounded.

On seeing his lord in trouble, Han Jie immediately tried to help by saying, "Why don't I start the ball rolling. The person I am most impressed with is Sun Wu\*. Not only did he leave behind an extremely exceptional book of military strategies, he also managed, with just a little trick and only a few thousand Wu soldiers, to infiltrate and defeat the Chu army, who had more than ten times the number of soldiers and went straight to the Capital. Indeed no one else before, or even after him, has been able to accomplish anything close."

\*Sun Wu – also known as Sun Tzu who wrote the Book of War

Xiang Shaolong can't help but quietly recite these famous words, "Ahead, I see no one else before me; Behind, I see no one else after me; Contemplating the vastness of the world; I can't help but weep out of loneliness and sadness." \* He secretly thought that only those who have personally

experienced the battles of this era will understand how impressive that battle of Sun Wu is.

\* Poem from Tang Dynasty by Chen Zi'ang.

Du Bi agreed, "Ha! Lord Han have said exactly the words in my mind. The person I'm most impressed with in my life is Sun Wu as well."

Shi Sufang's clear eyes gazed at Lao Ai and he hurriedly added, "Sun Wu may be the best expert in military tactic, but ultimately he has to answer to some lord or ruler. The person I am most impressed with is Duke Wen of Jin, who maintained internal security and repelled external forces to build a great kingdom. His accomplishments are greatly above those of Qi Huan."

Shi Sufang replied with no particular preference, "So Lord Ai is one with great ambitions."

Pu Hu and Du Bi exchanged looks, obviously like Xiang Shaolong, they could hear the subtle sarcasm that Shi Sufang was making regarding Lao Ai's wish to become the ruler.

Lao Ai thought that Shi Sufang was complimenting him and became smug.

Xiang Shaolong was feeling a little vexed. There're about six people in this feast but each harbors their own intentions and there's not an inkling of sincerity or joy in this gathering at all. Not only do they not share the same interest in topics, the discussion seems to be quite disjointed as well. He can't help but exclaim, "I am the exact opposite from Lord Lao, I have no

ambitions at all. There are so many people who have impressed me that I find it very difficult to choose just one. All right! It's Miss Shi's turn now."

Pu Hu interrupted with a smile, "The person I am most impressed with is Lord Xiang, so unconstrained that others have no way of guessing. No wonder even Guan Zhongxie had to admit defeat when faced with your battle-weary sword."

Lao Ai's expression changed slightly. Although he knows very well that Pu Hu is just trying to flatter Xiang and belittling himself, it's a fact that Xiang Shaolong has many surprises indeed. In no way at all is he disadvantaged because of Shi Sufang's excellent way with words, unlike himself who seemed to be always caught in a dilemma. It's really difficult not to feel any ounce of jealousy at all.

Han Jie interrupted, "I wonder who is the famed ruler or general who has Miss Shi's admiration?"

Everyone was interested in finding out Shi Sufang's answer.

A light fog seems to cloud Shi Sufang's bright eyes as she quietly sighed, "A great teacher will surely live in a place surrounded by thorns, a year of suffering will definitely ensue after a great army. In a battle for land, men are killed in the wild. In a battle for cities, men are killed in the city. Behind every famed ruler and general, is the suffering of the people, so how can there be anyone who impresses Sufang."

This time even Du Bi was at a loss for words.



Instead it was Xiang Shaolong who had momentarily forgotten the hidden enmity of all those present who exclaimed in surprise, “Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives. \* As the saying goes, behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands. War has always brought honor to only a handful of people. I really did not expect Miss to feel the same way. Hey! Why are all of you looking at me so strangely?”

\*Poem by Chen Tao – Dreams of the Departed

When he uttered the first two verses, Shi Sufang has already turned to look at him in surprise, even Pu Hu and the rest were taken aback.

Only then did Xiang Shaolong realize that he has spoken too quickly and again plagiarized the famous words of ‘forbearers’.

His understanding of poetry may be limited, but those that he knows are the most popular and most brilliant verses.

Han Jie furrowed his brows, “Pity on the bones which lie by the River Wuding, were once lovers in the dreams of their young wives. These two verses aptly describe the cruelty of war, but I wonder in which state is River Wuding in?”

\*River Wuding is in Inner Mongolia. Wuding’s literal translation can also mean uncertain.

Xiang Shaolong avoided Shi Shufang’s extremely round and animated eyes as

he blushed in reply, "That can be any river, that's why it's called Uncertain River."

Du Bi took a close look at him before he said with a sigh, "No wonder Learned Lady Ji fell for Lord Xiang. Behind every great success is the sacrifice of thousands, but since time memorial, wars have never stopped. It's either you'll kill me or I'll kill you, there's nothing anyone can do."

Lao Ai, on seeing that Xiang Shaolong has managed to surprise Shi Sufang, was feeling greatly discouraged and a feeling of jealousy aroused. He changed the topic, "Miss Shi still has not told us who the person who will command your compliance is."

Shi Sufang slowly took her eyes away from Xiang Shaolong and glanced at Lao Ai before settling her gaze on the pillar on top of the roof before saying forlornly, "There is this person in the state of Chu. It was said that the King of Chu is aware of his intelligence and sent some men to employ him as the Premier. He then asked the emissary, 'I heard the King of Chu has a divine turtle which has been dead for more than 3,000 years and the King of Chu kept it in a cloth tube. Would this turtle prefer to be dead and his bones be kept as a treasure? Or would it rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud?'. The emissary replied, 'Of course it'd rather be alive and dragging its tail around in mud.'. That person then said, 'Go! I want to drag my tail around in mud.'"

All of them looked at one another in bewilderment as they wonder why she is suddenly telling another story now.

Xiang Shaolong was thinking rapidly, wondering which famed forbearer will have such a story where he's so dispassionate about fame and fortune. He can only hate himself for his limited knowledge, as he is only aware of a few Confucianists and Mohists whose name that every one knows. Suddenly a thought went past his head as he slapped the table and exclaimed, "So Miss is most impressed with Zhuang Zhou\*, who is adept at using metaphors to illustrate his points, no wonder you love telling stories so much."

\* Ancient philosopher more commonly known as Zhuang Zi (Master Zhuang)

Only now did the rest of the people think of Zhuang Zhou and instantly looked at Xiang Shaolong in a new light.

Shi Sufang's eyes gleamed excitedly as she looked at him intently in surprise.

This is the difference between the modern and ancient world.

In this era, bamboo books are manually written so circulation is not widespread and only a handful of people have the privilege of having books. Unlike the 21st century, where people can not only easily obtain any form of publications, there are also electronic books. Compared to this ancient era where knowledge is difficult to come by, the difference is as wide as heaven and earth.

Shi Sufang asked in surprise, "So Lord Xiang has some knowledge of Zhuang Zhou. I've been looking around but have yet to find anyone who has such outstanding views like him. He is the only one who truly understands the meaning of life. Not taking into consideration the difference between life and

death, birth and demise, success and failure, right and wrong, praise and blame, breaking away from the bounds of the world, the ties of emotions, regarding oneself as being as one with the universe. There's no more differentiating between 'me' or 'others'."

This time it was Xiang Shaolong and the rest of the group's turn to be amazed. From her understanding of Zhuang Zi, they can now tell how overwhelming is this beauty's intelligence.

Han Jie asked with great respect, "May I be so bold as to ask where Miss is from originally?"

Shi Sufang's eyes revealed endless pain as she said gently, "The citizen of a doomed country, there's no need to mention it further."

Lao Ai, who came with only thoughts of lust, now has all his evil thoughts erased as he was touched to the core.

Shi Sufang suddenly stood up, took two steps back and bowed, "Although I still owe everyone a cup of wine, but I can only make it up to all of you another day. Sufang only wants to go to a quiet place now to mull over some questions. Everyone, please help yourselves."

Pu Hu was about to speak up and ask her to stay but stopped himself, his expressions complex as well.

As Xiang Shaolong gazed at her perfect silhouette, he secretly thought that in terms of intellect and beauty, this lady is comparable with Ji Yanran and Qin

Qing, but obviously not as lucky as them.

He made up his mind that no matter what happens, he will no longer contact her because he now has genuine respect for her and cannot bear to hurt her just because they are on opposing camps.

Although she has successfully aroused Lao Ai's jealousy towards him, there is nothing he can do now.

Lao Ai can deal with him whatever way he wants.

## Chapter 9

### I Concede

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Even after his return to the Wu Residence, Xiang Shaolong will still randomly think about this strange lady Shi Sufang.

Teng Yi, Jing Jun, Wu Guo and Zhao Da were in discussion with Ji Yanran. Everyone looked somber.

On seeing that her husband is so obedient that he actually came back before the first watch, Ji Yanran smiled and said, “We were just discussing how we can find the assassination organization that was sent to assassinate Lord Zhengchu. It’s really too dangerous if we allow them to strike.”

Teng Yi furrowed his brows, “The problem is, we cannot publicize this matter. We can only do it secretly, the less people to know about it, the better. Otherwise, Guoxin’s identity will be exposed.”

Jing Jun gave a cold snort, “I don’t trust Guoxin at all.”

Ji Yanran pursed her lips into a smile and said, “We won’t trust Guoxin easily as well but we have to give him a chance to prove his own words!”

Xiang Shaolong sat down next to Jing Jun and said with a laugh, “This is called abandoning the dark for the light, turning over a new leaf, correcting a mistake. Xiaojun, you have to remember that forgiveness requires even more

courage and love than hatred.”

Naturally all of them have never heard such a phrase or such logic and they were all stunned.

Ji Yanran asked happily, “My lord husband seems to be in a good mood tonight. Is it because you’ve gotten Shi Sufang’s favor again?”

Xiang Shaolong thought of Shi Sufang. He sighed, “Shi Sufang can only be described as being a rare lady. I think she has absolutely no interest in relationships between men and women at all. What she likes is Zhuang Zhou, she’s disdainful about her own singing skills. She has an intense and unique way of looking at things. Lao Ai ended up like a mouse pulling a turtle\*, not knowing where to begin and getting snubbed whereas I kept a respectful distance. End of report, is the talented lady satisfied?”

\*Mouse pulling a turtle – A Chinese idiom, meaning an impossible task

As soon as he said the phrase ‘mouse pulling a turtle’, Ji Yanran laughed so hard that she couldn’t catch her breath. Jing Jun and the rest were all smiling but by now, they are all used to Xiang Shaolong’s endless new and interesting phrases.

Wu Guo sighed, “Who can be more eloquent than Master Xiang? Luckily I have been Master Xiang’s follower for a long time and picked up some of his speech. That’s how I managed to woo Xiao Weiwei successfully, and did not disappoint Master Jing.”

Only now did Xiang Shaolong realize that Jing Jun had been supporting Wu Guo's pursue of Zhou Wei. He turned towards Zhao Da and asked, "Are you and your brothers doing well in Xianyang?"

Zhao Da revealed a look of gratitude as he nodded his head, "We've never had such glorious days before. As soon as we reveal Master Xiang's name, even those from Zhongfu Residence have to give us some measure of respect. Madam Fang also allowed us to choose the pretty girls to start our families. Hai, Lady left us too soon" Once he spoke of Zhao Ya, his eyes reddened.

Teng Yi was afraid of bringing up Xiang Shaolong's sad past again and changed the topic, "We've decided to transfer a batch of men back to Xianyang, to be in charge of searching for this group of extremely dangerous warriors. We've also informed Lord Changwen, asking him to report this matter immediately to the Crown Prince. It's the Spring Festival the day after tomorrow, I'm afraid our enemies will make use of the Spring Festival Ceremony to strike when the Crown Prince leaves the Palace. According to custom, the route to River Wei has already been decided and it cannot be changed. If the assassins hide themselves amongst the welcoming crowd along the paths, it'll be very difficult to spot them."

Xiang Shaolong suddenly shuddered as he remembered how many times he had protected politically important persons in the 21st century. He can be considered an expert in anti-terrorism so won't he be able to put to useful practice what he has learnt for this situation? Everyone saw his strange expression and were all looking at him, stunned, under the impression that he had thought of something shocking.



Xiang Shaolong waved his hand offhandedly as he said with excitement, “I’ll be in charge of security for the Spring Festival this time. After the morning court session tomorrow, Xiaojun will come with me to survey the route to the Spring Festival Ceremony. Let us have a face to face combat with these elite assassins who are from the various countries, each using our own methods and see who is better.”

Everyone looked at him in astonishment as Xiang Shaolong smiled and said, “The most vicious part of Pu Hu’s plan, is that if something happens to the Crown Prince while on his way to the Spring Festival Ceremony, Lord Changwen and I will be punishable by death. He’s killing multiple birds with one stone. From what I see, Pu Hu’s intellect is definitely on par with Lu Buwei, just that he’s a little down on luck. Just like my duel with Guan Zhongxie the last time, he placed his bet on the wrong person!” He stood up and stretched lazily before adding, “This time they’re still down on their luck, because they are facing me, Xiang Shaolong.”

The next morning, Xiang Shaolong woke up as usual before the cock crows to practice his swordplay before leaving for the Palace. As he was especially early, he made use of the little extra time to look for Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan may be the most hardworking prince in the history of the Qin family as he listened to Li Si’s reports while having breakfast so that he can handle the court discussion later.

On seeing that Xiang Shaolong has arrived, Xiao Pan hurriedly dispensed with ceremony and asked him to take the lower seat as he said with a serious expression, “Pu Hu and Du Bi are indeed audacious, how dare they have

ulterior motives towards me. Guoxing was able to redeem his mistake, General please see how he should be rewarded!"

Xiang Shaolong exchanged a look with Li Si, then said with a laugh, "Your subordinate advises Crown Prince to address me as Grand Tutor. If you address me as General, it feels as if I'll be leading an army into battle any time."

In the whole of Qin, Xiang Shaolong is the only person who could speak to Xiao Pan like that.

Xiao Pan chortled, "As soon as I see Grand Tutor, all my worries are gone." He turned towards Li Si and said, "Li Si, can you let Grand Tutor have a look at the new coin we'll be launching for Black Dragon!"

Li Si happily placed the new coin on Xiang Shaolong's table.

Xiang Shaolong picked it up for a look. It's a round coin with a round hole in the middle, and written on it the words half tael, with an abstract looking dragon shape. It's really a vast difference from the image of money he had in mind.

Li Si returned to his table and said with a sigh, "Learned Lady Ji indeed lives up to her reputation, with her proposal to change the political system. Not only is it practical and feasible, the political and economical reforms are also taken into consideration. The timeline for implementation is also indicated and the stages of implementation are just right such that the people won't feel forced into it. Please tell Learned Lady that Li Si is in total awe."

Xiao Pan obviously thinks very highly of Li Si as he said with a laugh, "Official Li is too humble. Official Li has given a lot of examples in the whole proposal, and has contributed as much merit as Grand Tutor Ji."

Li Si hurriedly knelt down to give his thanks.

Xiao Pan was silent for a moment before asking Xiang Shaolong, "How is grand Tutor planning to deal with the assassins who are coming to Xianyang this time?"

Xiang Shaolong replied easily, "Don't worry, Crown Prince. The only chance those rebels have to strike is to take us by surprise during the ceremony when your Highness is paying homage to the river god. But now that we're aware of this, the whole situation is reversed. I will work closely with Lord Changwen and crush our enemies' devious plot. I guarantee that not only will no harm come to your Highness, we can also make use of this chance to show those who are involved from the 6 countries our prowess."

Xiao Pan looks up upon him like a deity and he exclaimed joyfully, "With Grand Tutor in charge of this matter, there's nothing for me to worry."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "But your Highness must promise to let me have full control of everything tomorrow, otherwise it'll be difficult to execute our marvelous plan."

Xiao Pan chortled, "Then I will be Grand Tutor's subordinate for one day tomorrow and obey all your instructions."

Li Si gave a heartfelt smile as he felt the total trust and sincerity between the two of them.

The morning court session started with no major upheaval but once Lu Buwei brought up his intention to split the position of Salt and Iron Official into two positions, a fierce debate immediately ensued.

Xiang Shaolong listened for a long time and could only barely understand the gist of the matter.

It turns out that before Duke Xiao, almost all the trades in Qin were monopolized by the government. But in order to handle the production in these trades, the Qin government set up government agencies to take charge of the different industries. One of the most important posts is that of the Salt and Iron Official as it affects both the common people and the military.

But with the expansion of Qin, a few iron producing centers in the east have slowly fallen into the hands of the Qin people. The duties of the Salt and Iron Official are getting heavier day by day and there are also instances of smuggling salt and iron for personal gains. Besides, salt and iron are basically two entirely unrelated products. Therefore Lu Buwei came up with this suggestion.

The main problem with Lu Buwei's suggestion is that he wanted his own people in charge of Qin's economic and military matters, the two most important lifeline of the empire. Therefore Lord Changpin, Li Si and the rest are trying to delay this until the birth of Black Dragon so that they can make use of the opportunity to take these two positions back.

Naturally it's easier to delay than to object and in the end, there was no determined outcome. Xiao Pan gave the orders for this to be future discussed and the morning court session ended.

Xiang Shaolong returned home and Teng Yi and Jing Jun are already waiting for him to scout the route that Xiao Pan will be taking tomorrow morning.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "How's the situation?"

Teng Yi replied, "Guoxing just reported that Wu Guo had accompanied him to visit the various leaders. According to him, there's not much headway regarding the assassins."

Jing Jun added, "I've discussed it with Lord Changwen. He said we can just find some excuse, for example some guard has stolen items from the palace, then we'll seal the city and search each and every household. Ever since Shang Yang's reforms have been put in place, those who do not report crimes are guilty of the same offense so it should be easy to find any suspicious people. But if these people are hiding in some general or senior officials' residences, it'll be more difficult."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "You must not act rashly. We must pretend that we know nothing at all about this and tell Guoxing not to investigate so that we won't put them on their guard."

Teng Yi smiled, "Third Brother seemed very confident about the Crown Prince's safety tomorrow?"

Xiang Shaolong gave a slight smile and summoned Zhao Da. After giving him instructions to inform Lord Wenchang and Guoxing, he left with Teng Yi and Jing Jun.

They left the city of Xianyang and walked towards River Wei on the official road. Along the way, they only saw endless grassland and knolls. They can't help but feel energized as they enjoyed the scenery, almost forgetting the purpose of their trip.

The emerald lake, the luscious green grass with rays reflecting off them is simply enchanting.

Once in a while they will see shepherds with their herds with cows, goats or horses on the grassland and such a scene added a sense of life and energy on the land.

Teng Yi pointed to a small hillock which was overgrown with trees and said, "If someone hides up there with a strong bow, he'll be able to shoot any target travelling on the official road."

Xiang Shaolong was jolted awake from the mesmerizing scenery and he instructed Jing Jun to note down on his scroll all the possible locations that the assassins can make use of.

Although it's noon, but when they travelled through a densely forested segment of the road, the morning fog has yet to disperse. The air is moist and vision is little hazy. Teng Yi paled as he said, "From the looks of the weather, there will be heavy fog tomorrow. It's extremely to our disadvantage."

Xiang Shaolong replied calmly, "I don't think it's entirely to our disadvantage. At least we know our enemies will choose the time when the fog is the heaviest when we are going there to strike and not strike on the return journey. Secondly, the heavy fog is even more favorable to the birth of Black Dragon."

Jing Jun said in awe, "Third Brother is obviously very confident."

Xiang Shaolong asked happily, "My two good brothers, have you every heard of the story of 'Attacking the wrong carriage'?"

Teng and Jing replied concurrently in confusion, "Attacking the wrong carriage?"

Only then did Xiang Shaolong remember that 'Attacking the wrong carriage'\* incident happened after Xiao Pan became Emperor Qin, when Zhang Liang and his strongman attacked the wrong carriage with the iron hammer. He hurriedly tried to cover his mistake and said, "That is what will happen tomorrow. As long as the Crown Prince is hiding in another carriage, we can lure our enemies out without worry and annihilate them."

\* Note: Zhang Liang's assassination attempt on Emperor Qin during one of his inspection tours. He found a very strong man and forged an extremely heavy hammer for the strongman. During the ambush, Zhang assumed that the most ornately decorated carriage in the middle is Emperor Qin's carriage and the strongman hurled the hammer at the carriage, killing its occupant. However, it turned out that Emperor Qin was not the person in that carriage.

Teng and Jing both exclaimed the ingenuity of the plan. By then they are no longer in the mood to survey the areas along the route and after making some plans, they went to River Wei to meet up with Ji Yanran, who is in charge of masquerading as Black Dragon, before returning to the city together.

By the time they returned to the Wu Residence, it's already dusk.

As soon as they stepped into the main door, Tao Fang informed that Wu Fu had just arrived and waiting for him in the East Hall.

Ji Yanran said in half-seriousness, "Someone is here to fish for news but don't follow him to Drunken Breeze Loft. Don't forget that you have not accompanied us for two nights. If you don't get an early rest, let's see where you'll find the energy to deal with those assassins."

Xiang Shaolong snickered, "Even if I have enough energy, I won't waste it on those women. I already have the whole world. Other than my pretty wives, nothing else in this world will be able to tempt me."

Ji Yanran smiled sweetly and let him go.

When he arrived at the East Hall, he saw that Wu Fu was behaving restlessly and secretly thought it amusing. He went up and said, "Master Wu really should not be here, what if it raises the suspicion of Lao Ai and Lu Buwei's men?"

Wu Fu had already prepared his speech as he replied humbly, "Master Xiang,



do not worry, I will be extremely careful.”

After they sat down, Wu Fu asked quietly, “What was the Crown Prince’s reaction after he found out about that matter?”

Xiang Shaolong was secretly amused as he replied calmly, “Of course he was furious, but because of the Empress Dowager, he can only be on his guard secretly until he finds evidence. By then he’ll be able to settle scores with Lao Ai and let’s see how the Empress Dowager can protect him then.”

He paused and added, “The Crown Prince admires your loyalty very much and was considering how he should reward you.”

Wu Fu was ecstatic, “As long as I can be of service to the Crown Prince and Master Xiang, I am satisfied. I’m not concerned about rewards.”

Xiang Shaolong said deliberately, “Otherwise we can create an official post for you to enjoy, but someone else will have to take care of your Drunkard Wind Loft because no official can ever open a brothel as a sideline. And it won’t look good either if made known. Anyway, you’ve earned more than enough!”

Wu Fu was thrilled as he replied with a wide grin, “That’s a minor problem. Master Pu had always wanted to buy over my Drunkard Wind Loft. If the sale is successful, I will give half of the proceeds to you. I know that such a trivial amount is nothing in Master Xiang’s eyes but it represents a little token on my part.”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that this gift is considered quite substantial.

He suddenly had a thought. This Wu Fu is actually trying to cover all bases so that no matter which side gains the upper hand, he can still enjoy advantages.

Once he had this understanding, he realized that this person can be made used of.

Especially when the Black Dragon is about to be born tomorrow, it will certainly shock the kingdom, and the rise of one group will mean the decline of the other. Once Xiao Pan's reputation soars, people like Wu Fu who sees where the wind blows should know who they must side with.

Wu Fu furrowed his brow, "If Master Xiang is interested in that lady from my loft, just a word from you and I'll send her over to serve you. Even if it's Meimei, I'll have a way."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "You're not afraid of Lu Buwei?"

Wu Fu sighed, "I've no choice even if I'm afraid. Meimei is now using her life to threaten me and she refuses to become Lu Buwei's concubine. Of course, if I have Meimei's beauty, I wouldn't want to marry into Zhongfu Residence as well."

Xiang Shaolong was very surprised. So Dan Meimei is with Lu Buwei because she fear his power and not because she's willing. His hatred for her diminished immediately and a sense of pity rose up instead as he asked,

“How is Lu Buwei handling this matter?”

Wu Fu laughed, “What can he do? He can only try to pressure and bribe me but poor me is threatened by Lao Ai as well. I’m sandwiched in the middle and have not had a good night’s sleep. Master Xiang, just take a look at me now and you’ll know.”

Xiang Shaolong took a close look at his face and indeed he looked haggard with dark circles under his eyes. He said with a smile, “If you knew this would happen, why do it in the first place? Lu Buwei has no feelings at all yet you helped him trick me. Aren’t you just looking for trouble?”

Wu Fu was stunned at first, then he paled as he stuttered, “I don’t understand what you mean.”

Xiang Shaolong smiled, “Even Mo Ao couldn’t trick me, so how do you think you fare when compared to Mo Ao?”

Wu Fu threw himself to the ground and exclaimed in fear, “Master Xiang have misunderstood me, if I lie...”

Xiang Shaolong interrupted him, “Please don’t make any life or death vows, otherwise I may really decide to punish you in Heaven’s name just like what you wished for.”

Wu Fu cried out, “Please believe me, I really...”

‘Swish!’ The precious sword that has been through hundreds of battles left its

sheath.

Wu Fu was so terrified he scrambled away, cold sweat as large as peas filled his forehead as his face turned deathly pale.

Xiang Shaolong placed the precious sword nonchalantly on the table next to him and said off handedly, "I won't hide it from you. I have spies with Lu Buwei and Lao Ai, so I know everything. If you utter one more word of untruth, I will chop off your head with this sword and parade it at the market square. Of course the offense will be deceiving the ruler."

Wu Fu was stunned for a moment before he replied dejectedly, "I concede!"

## **Chapter 10**

### **The Dragon Rises from River Wei**

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Spring Festival.

Before the sun rose, most of the citizens of Xianyang city have already changed into new clothes, as if it's a market day and headed towards the upstream of River Wei to take part in the grand Spring festivities.

Although the roads were crowded, everything was in an orderly fashion.

Under the orders of Teng Yi, Jing Jun and Guo Yu, 200,000 cavalry were out in full force maintaining order along the way.

All the high posts along the way which can be used for ambush are guarded and security is tight.

If there are assassins, they can only make use of the woods on the sides of the roads as cover in order to execute their assassination attempts.

Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and a group of higher ranked officials went to the Palace to meet up with Xiao Pan before the sun rose. They first paid their respects to the late King at the ancestral shrine before leaving in carriages.

Under the protection of Lord Changwen and a group of elite imperial guards, Xiao Pan went according to plan and did not travel in the grand imperial

carriage. Instead he is dressed as one of the imperial guard and set off undercover with the main team.

Inside the imperial carriage was Jing Shan who was pretending to be Xiao Pan. This person's dexterity is comparable to Jing Jun and is really the best person who can deal with sudden changes.

Xiang Shaolong was still worried that something will happen to him and specially reinforced the walls of the horse carriage with steel plates, just like the bullet-proof vehicles of the 21st century.

The huge entourage left the palace gates and traveled along River Wei once they left the city.

The commoners were cheering along both sides of the road as a show of their support and love towards the ruler.

Each of the two teams has about a hundred odd imperial soldiers with ferocious dogs doing a sweep of the heavily forested areas along both sides of the road to prevent the enemy from hiding in the woods to shoot at them.

The Wu family warriors were disguised as common folk and mixed around in the crowd, almost like plain-clothes spies of the 21st century, keeping a look out for suspicious characters in the crowd.

Xiang Shaolong was riding behind the imperial carriage, constantly giving orders to the imperial guards, putting to total use everything he has learnt in the 21st century.

With the imperial guards opening the way, the imperial carriage moved right ahead. Everywhere they went the crowd hurriedly gave way, kneeling in respect.

On both sides of the team of carriages were two rows of imperial guards. The ones on the outer row held long shields while the ones on the inner row were armed with bows and arrows. In terms of defense, it is indeed extremely watertight.

Xiang Shaolong slowed down to more than 10 horse lengths behind and rode together with Xiao Pan, Li Si, Lord Wenchang etc.

Xiao Pan looked appreciatively at the horsemen on top of the hills on the left of them who were waving the flags signifying safety and said, "Grand Tutor's plans are indeed an eye opener for me."

Li Si added with a smile, "Even if the assassin is formidable with 3 heads or 6 arms, in my opinion there is no way he can find a window of opportunity to strike and can only retreat in face of such difficulty."

Xiang Shaolong looked up. Gazing at the heavy morning fog, he said with a smile, "The enemy must have made careful plans and will surely have ways to deal with sudden changes. If my guess is right, the main attack will come from further ahead. If they can get to the top of the trees, they'll be able to attack with weapons such as arrows and stones if we are not prepared. And with the support of the assassins who are working undercover among the crowd and with a clear target, they may be able to succeed after all."

Xiao Pan, Li Si and Lord Wenchang looked at the top of the trees that is covered in fog and can't help but feel a cold shiver in their hearts.

Xiang Shaolong continued, "Right in front there is a forest and it is the most ideal place for both attacking and escaping. If they want to strike, it would be that place."

Xiao Pan was thinking all these exciting as his eyes blazed hotly whereas Li Si and Lord Wenchang started feeling nervous, no longer in the mood to joke.

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought that Emperor Qin is Emperor Qin indeed, for his is braver than most men.

He nudged his horse and went after Wang Yu.

The leading troops led the way on the official road to the forest where the rites will be held.

The fog became thicker and anything more than ten steps away cannot be seen clearly.

The entourage has yet to arrive but the common folk can already hear the music as they hurriedly went down on their knees on both sides of the road and waited for the carriages to drive past.

Amidst the cheers and music, Wang Yu drove into the woods.

The imperial guards have received their instructions earlier and all are on the



alert to deal with any sudden events.

Xiang Shaolong was calm instead. His eyes searched out Wu Guo who was in the crowd and exchanged a look with him. He was not surprised if Wu Guo did not find out anything out of the ordinary.

If the enemy doesn't even have a way to disguise themselves, they won't even come.

When a group of experts have made a death wish and decided to assassinate a target, they will become a terrible force to reckon with.

Xiang Shaolong gave out orders to the soldiers surrounding them. Wu Yan and his men spread out a little more, behind Wang Yu. All were on high alert.

The half mile long forest road feels as long as a century.

Much to everyone's surprise, even when they were nearing the edge of the forest and the trees are beginning to thin, there's still no sign of any assassins.

The sound of the River Wei gushing ahead could be heard from up ahead.

Suddenly the road in front opened up and they saw the river gushing. The fog is now just like a thin blanket covering the earth.

Xiang Shaolong was just breathing a sigh of relief when there was a strange and sudden change.

Strange calls were heard from the sides of the road and just as Xiang Shaolong was still wondering what's happening, the imperial guards surrounding the imperial carriage all fell from their horses, followed by the horrible sound of a heavy object crashing towards the carriage at a shocking speed. The driver of the carriage had his head totally severed by some strange, horrible weapon and fell off the carriage. The eight horses which were pulling the carriage all fell in a pool of blood.

The outside walls of the carriage shattered and splintered, the sound shocking.

There was immediate chaos amongst the crowd as everyone tried to escape in all directions. Cries and screams filled the air and it was difficult to differentiate who is the enemy.

Xiang Shaolong roared as he pulled out his precious sword and charged forward.

A few people jumped out from the sides of the road.

With a 'whoosh', one of them used a heavy metal bar to smash the door open. By now the nearest imperial guard to the imperial carriage who's not yet dead or injured is at least ten steps away.

"Argh!" one of the men who tried to dash up the carriage was struck in front with an arrow and fell to the floor.

All the warriors fired their arrows. The attackers were all shot dead but two

of them managed to somersault backwards and slipped into the woods, avoiding the arrows.

Xiang Shaolong and his men went to surround the area.

More than a dozen shadows escaped from two sides, running towards River Wei.

Amidst the sounds of hooves and cries, the guards ran after them.

Xiang Shaolong ran up to the side of the smashed carriage door and shouted, "Calm the masses!" Xiang Shaolong took a look inside the carriage.

Only to see Jing Shan extend his deathly pale face as he stuttered, "Luckily there were the steel slabs. Otherwise I'll be dead."

Xiang Shaolong took a better look, and saw more than a dozen round metal wheels scattered on the ground, their edges thin and sharp as they shone but by now all of them have a broken edge.

He took another look at the 30 odd imperial guards lying in pools of blood around the carriage, all of whom died instantly. The scene was frightening with broken pieces of armor scattered around the road.

Such circular wheels that were thrown with the hands are even more fatal than bows and arrows, such that even armors are of no protection.

Another look at the walls of the carriage. The wood was splintered, revealing

the steel plates that had become warped. He can't help but suck in an icy breath.

Two of the circular wheels managed to fly into the carriage and sliced open Jing Shan's armor when they rebounded. Luckily it was only a minor wound.

The entourage stopped.

The frightened masses were gathered to a corner, far away from the crime scene. Wu Guo was in charge over there to check if there are any assassins hiding amongst the masses.

Xiao Pan and the rest came up to Xiang Shaolong and after seeing the horrible aftermath, they were all fearfully astounded.

By now Lord Changwen's men came to report that the assassins jumped into the river and swam across to the opposite bank. They only managed to kill three of them.

Xiang Shaolong jumped off his horse to check on the assassins who were killed. All of them were struck by at least three arrows and died on the spot. There're no further clues that are worth pursuing.

Wan Chi, Wang Lin, Lao Ai, Lu Buwei and the other officials hurriedly rushed forward and on seeing Jing Shan walking out from within the carriage, were all dumbfounded.

Xiao Pan removed his helmet and revealed himself. His expression was icy as

he ordered Guan Zhongxie, "Search the city immediately. If there are still assassins inside the city, you can say goodbye to your position as Commander of the City Guards."

His gaze fell upon the corpse filled ground and said sadly, "Give them a grand burial and compensation!" He could not bear to witness any more of this and nudged his horse towards the grounds for the Spring rites.

Although a great assassination tragedy has happened, most of the people are not aware of what happened and the atmosphere is still lively.

When Xiao Pan, Zhu Ji, Lu Buwei and the rest of the officials ascended the platform for the rites, the sound of drums were heard and the tens of thousands of common folk gathered on the bank of the river all knelt down and chorused, "Long live your Majesty."

Teng Yi and Jing Jun gave orders to the Calvary as they were left in charge of maintaining order.

Ever since the reforms of Shangyang, amongst the seven states of the warring kingdoms, the people of Qin are the most law-abiding and obedient. Even in such a situation, everything is done in an orderly fashion.

Because of what happened earlier, Xiang Shaolong and the rest were worried that there are still assassins hiding among the crowd so they erected a human barrier, segregating everyone a safe distance away.

The fog thickened again, seemingly frozen on the river and refusing to

disperse, which lets one feel that nature can be such a mystery.

Xiang Shaolong who was standing below the platform kept an eye on the expressions of Du Bi and Pu Hu, who were standing on the platform. Although they looked normal, they occasionally let slip small movements which betrayed their uneasiness. He knows that they are feeling lost now that the assassination attempt has failed.

Xiao Pan took over the torch and lighted the kindling in the giant cauldron. The fiery flame shot heavenward as the smoke filled the air, into the fog.

The whole place was solemnly silent.

Xiao Pan opened the ritual script and started reading aloud.

He stood erect, with a solemn air and indeed has the regal bearing of a ruler of the world.

At this point in time Teng Yi came up to Xiang Shaolong and said quietly, "I heard that even Xiaoshan almost lost his life. I didn't expect the assassins to be so formidable.

Xiang Shaolong was still shaken as he replied, "If the target is me, even I would not be able to survive. Who would have expected that they would have such frightening weapons."

Teng Yi stared at River Wei, which was covered with a layer of smoke and fog, the opposite bank is now totally indiscernible by now. Teng Yi gave him a

nudge and said, “Coming!”

Xiang Shaolong could not see anything at all initially but after his warning, his eyes sought out the surroundings and indeed realized that something seems to be stirring up the river as it bubbled with ferocity.

Those standing near the bank began to realize something strange is happening and they all started pointing in astonishment.

Lu Buwei and the rest, who were on the platform, were all dumbfounded, looking quizzically at the river.

The crowd standing further back all stepped forward to have a closer look.

The voice of Xiao Pan’s reading the rites was slowly covered by the shouts of the crowd.

A black, curved dragon’s tail emerged about five feet from the water amongst the fog before it smashed back into the water ferociously and water droplets flew up into the air, seemingly clearing the heavy fog.

Xiang and Teng did not expect Ji Yanran to come up with this move. This moving animal, when compared to the ‘dead dragon’ used during the rehearsal, is as different as heaven and earth. Everyone was shocked.

The crowd on the banks and the leaders and officials on the platform were all shell-shocked. Cries of wonderment rose up.

There are even some who were so frightened that their legs have turned to jelly and they collapsed to the ground.

The imperial guards were still shaken by what happened earlier and they hurriedly surrounded Xiao Pan, some of them even pulling out their weapons.

Xiao Pan stopped them with a shout, “A mystical creature have emerged from the waters, do not act rashly. Anyone who disobeys will be beheaded.”

Of course Lord Changwen and the rest immediately stopped the guards to avoid another ‘tragedy’ from happening. The river is now calm again.

Tens of thousands of people all held their breath as they stared at the river.

Suddenly there were cries of alarm as deep in the fog, a black dragon head revealed its mystical presence again, creating waves as it bobbed on the water. It took some time before sinking back into the water again.

Xiang Shaolong and the rest shouted in chorus, “The birth of the Black Dragon, Heaven has bestowed a mythical creature upon Great Qin and we have the support of the River God.”

Lord Changping took the lead and knelt down first. The rest of the people followed him and knelt as well. Even Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie and the rest were influenced by the air of excitement and knelt down as well.

For about 5 miles along the riverbank, it was filled with people offering their



prayers towards the river.

In the end only Xiao Pan remained standing on the platform alone, lifting his hands up in the air as he faced the river, his stance certainly standing out from the crowd.

As the thousands held their breath, the Black Dragon appeared again.

The gigantic dragon head emerged just a few feet away, directly in front of Xiao Pan before sinking down again. This happened three times. The whole dragon rose out of the water, more than a hundred feet long, its tail constantly slapping on the water. Everyone who saw it was terrified.

The black dragon suddenly let rip an earth shattering roar. Although Xiang Shaolong and the rest knows very well that this is the effect of many men shouting at the same time, they can't help but be impressed with the realistic effect.

Fire suddenly shot out of the black dragon's eyes as its head bobbed three times towards Xiao Pan, as if it is bowing to him before going back into the water.

Wang Chi took the opportunity to shout, "A magical creature has blessed our sovereign, long live our Majesty."

The crowd regained their senses as they cried out in unison, "Long live the Black Dragon, long live our Majesty!" The cheers waved and ebbed like the water on the river, echoing across the valley as thousands of people became

excited and the atmosphere became extremely lively.

The black dragon did not appear again. Lu Buwei, Guan Zhongxie, Du Bi, Pu Hu, Lao Ai all looked at one another in astonishment, not knowing how they should consider this strange and frightening event that just happened right in front of their eyes.

Striking while the iron is hot, everyone was celebrating the fact that the black dragon has blessed their king. On Xiao Pan's way back to the palace, Ji Yanran disguised herself as a messenger and blocked Xiao Pan's path to offer him Zou Yan's 'Complete Book of Five Virtues'.

This dramatic scene of blocking the path to offer a book caused another stir and by now the emotions of the officials and the common people is uncontrollable.

Groups of court officials and generals went to the palace on their own accord to visit Xiao Pan as they pledged their loyalty. Firecrackers can be heard everywhere in Xianyang City.

The people were dancing and singing on the streets as they made their way to the palace to pay their respects.

Taking Xiang Shaolong's suggestion, Xiao Pan opened up the training grounds in the palace to the public and even came out three times to receive the people's adulation. Naturally security was extremely tight as well.

Lu Buwei and Lao Ai were caught off guard and although they harbored some

suspicious, there was nothing they can do.

The appearance of black dragon is ten times more formidable than ten copies of “Spring and Autumn Annals of Lu”. Xiao Pan’s reputation suddenly soared to the highest point that was previously unheard of.

That afternoon, Wang Wan, Lord Changping, Li Si, Wang Chi, Wang Lin entered the palace to see Xiao Pan to suggest that the Qin imperial family formally use Zou Yan’s ‘Complete Book of Five Virtues’ as the national book and to formally appoint Ji Yanran as the respected ‘Female Tutor’, to be in charge of drafting the change in policies in line with the mystical creature’s ‘new government’.

Even Xiang Shaolong, the engineer of this plan, did not expect that black dragon’s influence will be so formidable that quite a number of officials who were originally on Lu Buwei’s side have now changed their loyalty towards Xiao Pan.

Xiao Pan immediately called for a court session and Ji Yanran read out the new policies in court.

During the court session, all the officials looked excited but Lu Buwei and Zhu Ji were in shock.

But under such superstitious and mystical atmosphere, no one dares to openly oppose Xiao Pan who has received spiritual blessings.

The beautiful Learned Lady Ji wore a grand, long black robe embroidered

with dark gold thread with a tall headgear. With a stately expression, she first announced that River Wei will henceforth be known as 'Holy River'. As River Wei is one of the rivers connecting to the Yellow River, in other words, the whole of the Yellow River has now become the Holy River.

Because less water is available during the winter season, the tenth month where winter begins will now become the first month of the year. Followed by the 'Black as Color'\*, where colors correspond to the Five Elements and water corresponds to the color black.

\*From Elements of Color, in traditional Chinese art and culture, black, red, blue-green, white and yellow are viewed as standard colors. These colors correspond to the five elements of water, fire, wood, metal and earth.

Therefore black is now the main color in dressing, ornaments, pennants etc.

Followed by 'Six as Lead', whereby in the Five Elements, the number six correspond with Water so henceforth the various utensils will use the number six as a benchmark.

For example, official hats should be 6 inches long, carriages should be 6 foot wide and 6 foot equals to one pace.

On seeing this grand event which he single handedly planned unfolding, Xiang Shaolong's whole head was numb with excitement.

No one will be able to understand this event's far and wide influence on the Qin dynasty other than him, and it has left an indestructible mark on the

history of China.

After Qin unified China, the empire was divided into 36 commanderies, because 36 is the self multiplication of 6.

Another example is the classification of the numbers of wealthy merchants in the world in Xianyang as '120,000 households' because 120,000 is 6 times 20,000.

The last key political change is to make use of Ji Yanran to announce the execution of the 'Three Lords and Nine Ministers' system which Li Si meticulously planned in order to strengthen Xiao Pan's central power.

It is create disorder in the previous official system Lu Buwei established in the past by abusing his power and to twist the situation where they were previously bound by around.

On the surface it looks as if most of the people can still maintain their own authority and Lao Ai seems to be holding even greater power but in secret, it has become a situation where Lao Ai will keep Lu Buwei in check while Xiao Pan will once again gain tight control of the military and finances.

Lu Buwei is still the Premier, while Lord Changping is now the Grand Commandant instead of the Left Premier and Feng Qie is now the Imperial Secretary. Together they are known as the Three Lords.

The duties of the Three Lords are clearly defined.

The Premier is the head of the administrative officials and reports directly to the ruler and will be given a gold seal and purple ribbon to assist the Qin ruler in political matters of the country.

This is akin to denying Lu Buwei's identity as his 'Uncle' to feign his position as Regent. A premier is not the equivalent of the Ruler, but will have to seek the Ruler's opinion in every matter, thus strengthening the power of the imperial rule.

Lord Changping's role as Grand Commandant is to assist Xiao Pan in taking charge of the whole country's military affairs so that the Qin army will have a unified commander, imperceptibly cutting off the independent rule that men like Meng Ao, Du Bi had been enjoying with the armies under them.

This reform is similar to merging the old positions of Left Premier and Grand Marshal, and also akin to integrating the powers of Xu Xian and Lu Gong into one post. Through Lord Changping, Xiao Pan can directly control the Qin military, the strongest army in the world.

This position is also assigned the gold token and purple ribbon.

The last of the Three Lords, the position of the Imperial Secretary is the brain juice of the super intelligent Li Si who came up with this brilliant plan to reduce Lu Buwei's power.

On the surface, the Imperial Secretary is similar to Li Si's previous position of Chief Clerk, helping Xiao Pan handle all memorials and edicts, just that there's now the added responsibility of keeping an eye on the duties and

authority of the officials.

But when Ji Yanran described the detailed responsibilities, she pointed out that whatever affairs that the Premier is handling, the Imperial Secretary has the authority to question but the authority to oversee the Imperial Secretary is something that Lu Buwei as the Premier will not possess.

So it became that the Imperial Secretary will keep the Premier in check, ostensibly and obviously reducing quite a lot of Lu Buwei's influence.

Feng Qie used to be in charge of the judicial system and is a very upright person so no one dares to raise any objection about him taking on this position.

From this one can see how capable Xiao Pan is in using the people under him.

Whereas Lao Ai had a promotion from his position as Interior Minister to the Minister of Ceremony, responsible for state protocols and rituals and the head of the Nine Ministers. Under him were the six assistants: Grand Musician, Leader of Prayers, Judge of Policies, Grand Astrologer, Overseer of Temple and Leader of Rites.

This is a highly ranked position but with no real power, most suitable for someone with Lao Ai's identity as a 'fake eunuch' and this offer gives Zhu Ji due respect so that she will not be offended.

Lao Ai's original position as Interior Minister will be given to his brother Lao Ji.

From Xiang Shaolong, Xiao Pan understands that this person is a good for nothing, a lecherous bum so he's not worried about him at all.

Besides, the Interior Minister is all along only in charge of the documents and correspondences between the three major armies in the capital and the Palace. Even if he wants to plan some dirty tricks there is nothing he can base it on.

Lord Changwen became the second in command among the Nine Ministers, the Minister of Household, to be in charge of the defense of the whole city. In other words, the Imperial Guards, City Guards and Cavalry are all now under him.

Among the other 7 ministers: Minister of Guards, Minister of Coachman, Minister of Justice, Minister of Guests, Minister of Imperial Clan, Minister of Finance, Minister Steward, the three most important positions are those of the Minister of Justice, Minister of Finance and Minister Steward. They are taken up by Li Si, Wang Wan and Cai Ze respectively.

Li Si and his men gained a promotion of several ranks, in charge of the whole country's judicial punishment, becoming the country's highest ranked judge. Under him were the Main, Left and Right Supervisors. Lao Ai's keqing\* Ling Qi and Mao Jiao became the Left and Right Supervisor respectively.

\* keqing - a person from one feudal state serving in the court of another

Minister of Finance is in charge of the whole country's taxes and expenditure.



The Minster Steward takes care of the businesses and economy of the country and is another important post and an important official like Cai Ze is someone that Xiao Pan will have to appease.

As for the wars against others, Wang Chi, Meng Ao, Wang Ling and Wang Jian were appointed as the Four Great Supreme General whereas Xiang Shaolong, An Guxi and Du Bi were appointed as Great Generals and only the seven of them have the authority to lead the army into battles.

This can be considered a conciliated political reform with Xiao Pan gaining the most advantage, followed by Lao Ai. As for Lu Buwei, he can only wallow in self pity. But because Zhu Ji, Wang Guan and most of the senior officials are now supporting Xiao Pan, Lu Buwei have no choice but to accept it quietly.

The mystical help of Black Dragon which came at an opportune time, together with the act of 'blocking the path to offer a book', has at least knocked Lu Buwei off a few rungs from the extreme power he held. No longer will he be able to do whatever pleases him like in the past.

After Xiao Pan announced the end of the court session, the officials all chorused, 'Long live your Majesty' and then hurriedly rush home so that they can shower and change in time to take part in tonight's feast that will be held in the Palace. And the Winter Commencement day is now considered the New Year for Qin.

## **Chapter 11**

### **Returning Good For Evil**

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Xiang Shaolong had wanted to slip away but he was dragged by the recently promoted and over enthusiastic Li Si to see Xiao Pan. Ji Yanran was not as happy as them and went home on her own.

Although this time it cannot be considered a complete victory, but it's a huge change for the better. Want Chi, Wang Ling, Lords Changping and Changwen were all in high spirits as they surrounded Xiang Shaolong, this great mastermind into the inner court to see Xiao Pan.

On seeing everyone arriving, Xiao Pan walked down from his dragon throne, so touched that his eyes turned red from the emotions.

Xiang Shaolong was a bit confounded as he looked at Xiao Pan striding towards him in an imposing manner.

Suddenly he felt as if Xiao Pan is a total stranger, yet at the same time so close that he's like his own son.

The kind of two extreme reactions clashing together gave him an exceptionally strange feeling.

In another few years, Xiao Pan will be crowned as Emperor.

And his relationship with this future Emperor Qin, will have to come to an end.

He has to leave.

Because he does not wish to be drenched in the blood of the soldiers and civilians of the Six States. He is totally weary towards wars.

Xiao Pan's actual age is 19 years old, and he absolutely has the air and commanding presence of a ruler of the times who feels that he is way above all other living things.

He may be half a head shorter than Xiang Shaolong but his shoulders are broad and his limbs muscular with a squarish face and big ears. The most striking is his eyes, when he glanced over at Xiang Shaolong, even he felt a chill in his heart.

In the past, when Xu Xian and Lord Lu found out that he is not Lu Buwei's illegitimate son, they immediately pledged loyalty to him. And now Wang Ling and Wang Chi are devoted to him without any reason at all. Xiao Pan is just that kind of natural born political leader who has the charisma to make others submit to him.

One can imagine that when the time comes for him to be officially crowned as Emperor, he will become even more remarkable.

Xiao Pan came to Xiang Shaolong and grabbed his hands tightly as he exclaimed with joy, "Grand Tutor, we've succeeded."

Li Si and the rest surrounded the two of them and shouted out their congratulations. All of them were beginning to sound a little nonsensical.

All along, in the power struggle between a ruler and his power-holding official, the fight is never completed without some form of bloodshed.

But with this Black Dragon, a stroke of genius, they immediately sliced off more than half of Lu Buwei's power which he had painstakingly built up over many years and at the same time, possibly crushed the plans that he had been secretly making. To be able to achieve such an outcome without a single soldier or bloodshed, how can one not feel strangely touching.

With the current situation, it is absolutely impossible for anyone to raise a coup. Even the civilians of Xianyang will rise up to support Xiao Pan, not to mention the military which has always been loyal to the royal family.

Xiang Shaolong replied with a smile, "I should take a rest too, will your Majesty please grant me the permission."

Xiao Pan sighed, "Much as I am extremely unwilling to do so, I can only accede to your request. But once anything happens, Grand Tutor must come back to help me."

Xiang Shaolong felt as if a weight has been lifted off him as he said, "In politics there's Lord Changping and Li Tingwei and in military there's the two Supreme Generals. Your Majesty, just do as you deem fit!"

Everyone roared with laughter.

Because Xiang Shaolong is as good as saying, don't come disturbing me if there's nothing wrong.

Li Si chided laughingly, "Lord Xiang please do not make fun of me. With Xiang Shaolong, I will always be the same Li Si you met outside the city initially when you came back from Zhao."

Xiao Pan said, "When does Grand Tutor plan to return to the farm for your temporary leave?" On hearing his emphasis on the two words 'temporary leave', all of them revealed a knowing smile.

Instead Xiang Shaolong grabbed Xiao Pan's hands tightly, so tight that he could feel their flesh and blood merged together as he answered, "After we eliminate Qiu Risheng's Warrior School and after Xiao Jun's wedding, I'll return to the farm and take my temporary leave as you wish. I should still be in Xianyang for another ten odd days. Heh, I want to go home for a shower and change in order to get ready for the feast tonight."

Xiao Pan let go of Xiang Shaolong's hands unwillingly as he uttered emotionally, "That I, Ying Zheng, will have this day, is all thanks to Grand Tutor."

That he, as a ruler of the country, is willing to say such a statement, is enough to move everyone.

Only Xiang Shaolong truly understands the hidden meaning he is conveying.

Who would have expected that the mischievous imp of the past who only

knows how to harass palace maids will ultimately become the famous Emperor Qin who will unify the world?

Outside the palace doors, it was filled with people trying to take a look at the ruler and when they saw Xiang Shaolong coming out, cheers erupted immediately.

The sounds of hooves were heard. Guoxing, leading a troop rushed out from the side and saluted him from a distance.

On seeing Guoxing wearing his military uniform, like a changed man with his suave demeanor, Xiang Shaolong remembered the way Jing Jun looked when he wore his official uniform for the first time. He can't help but feel a deeper sense of closeness towards Guoxing.

Guoxing came up to him and accompanied him as he rode towards the Wu residence. He said with a quiet laugh, "I've been waiting outside for quite some time. Earlier when Lao Ai and Lu Buwei came out separately, the crowds all jeered at them and they were so livid their faces were contorted. But when Great General Xiang emerged, you received the loudest cheers."

Seeing little children in their brand new clothes setting off firecrackers and playing catch at the side, Xiang Shaolong has never felt so relaxed before.

Xiao Pan has finally stabilized his throne and in future, he's the only person who will settle scores with others. People like Lu Buwei and Lao Ai will only be fit to become his sparring practice targets.

Guoxing said, “Master Xiang, please trust me. In future I will follow you with absolute loyalty.”

On hearing the change in his behavior, Xiang Shaolong showed his magnanimity by saying, “I will be leaving in about 10 odd days and Xiao Jun will take over my position for the time being. Just follow Xiao Jun and work well with him, this is also the best opportunity for you to mend relations with him.”

After Guoxing nodded his head in agreement, he lowered his voice and said, “After 5 of those assassins escaped, they all ran to Du Bi’s General Residence to hide from the search. From what I understand from Qiu Risheng, they will masquerade themselves as warriors from our Warrior School and attend the feast tonight.

Xiang Shaolong asked in puzzlement, “Did they think they still have a chance at assassination tonight, or do they not know that all who enter the Palace to attend feasts are not allowed to bring weapons?”

Guoxing replied, “Qiu Risheng is not that careless, he just hopes to make use of those people to regain some prestige of his school.”

Xiang Shaolong said nonchalantly, “Fine, then let me see what this Qiu Risheng looks like tonight. If not because of Lao Ai, I would have torn his school down today.”

On hearing this, Guoxing was petrified and secretly relieved that he has ‘changed his loyalty to the wise ruler’, otherwise he would be one of those

who would face utter humiliation.

Guoxing added, "I heard that this morning Dan Meimei attempted suicide by hanging herself but luckily she was saved."

By now Xiang Shaolong only feels pity and no hate towards Dan Meimei. But it's really not convenient for him to interfere in this matter so he could only secretly lament that much as he would like to help, his hands are tied.

He can't stop himself from asking, "Is Dan Meimei's heart with Lao Ai?"

Guoxing gave a mysterious reply, "I'm afraid she's the only one who knows. But there has been talk amongst the servants going around Drunken Wind Loft, saying that the person Dan Meimei is really interested in is you, Master Xiang."

Xiang Shaolong was startled as he exclaimed hoarsely, "That must be a mistake, otherwise why would I not feel anything at all."

Guoxing bumped his shoulder as he replied, "A woman's heart is most unfathomable. Or maybe it's a wrong rumor!" By then they have reached the Wu residence and Guoxing left after saluting.

As soon as Xiang Shaolong thought of his own wonderful and warmhearted family, all thoughts of Dan Meimei were cast to the back of his mind immediately.

As soon as he stepped into the house, his men told him that the famous



courtesan Yang Yu from Drunken Wind Loft is here to look for him and currently waiting at the East Hall.

Xiang Shaolong was taken aback and he could roughly guess that this visit must be related to the unsuccessful suicide attempt by Dan Meimei and can only secretly heave a sigh.

He is almost of the mind to instruct his men to send Yang Yu away but ultimately he could not harden his heart to do it. After a brief internal struggle, he went to the East Hall.

This beauty was devoid of her makeup and wearing a plain outfit, and looks even more pleasing to the eye than when she was all decked up and heavily made up. Although she's still incomparable to the previous night's Shi Sufang, but her delicate beauty can still be considered rare.

Up until now he still cannot decipher the inner workings of this lady of the night's heart.

Is she forced to harm him because she had to submit to Lu Buwei's power? Or is she really in love with either Guan Zhongxie or Xu Shang, that's why she's willing to aid them in evil.

In an environment full of schemes and nefarious plots, he has learnt not to trust anyone easily.

At the same time he learnt how to use various methods to deal with his enemies, for example Wu Fu and Guoxing.

Yang Yu saw him arrive and left her seat in joy to receive him.

Xiang Shaolong was really worried that she will throw herself into his arms and if the servants see that, they will report to Wu Tingfang and the other ladies. By then there's no way he will be able to defend himself.

That's the thing with the human psychology. If he goes and have fun at Drunken Wind Loft, Learned Lady Ji and the rest can pretend ignorance as long as they don't witness anything but if he were to bring the playthings home, that's another matter altogether.

Xiang Shaolong hurriedly bowed and said politely, "Miss Yu, please take a seat."

Yang Yu is an expert in the psychology of men. She smiled sweetly and after giving him an extremely meaningful look, retreated back to her seat. She waited for Xiang Shaolong to sit down next to her before she raised her brows and said quietly, "Meimei wanted to hang herself this morning. Luckily we have been on the alert to prevent her from committing silly acts so we were able to save her in time. But now there's a horrible looking scar on her neck, she won't be able to receive guests for quite some time."

Xiang Shaolong furrowed his brows, "Miss Yu has come to see me, is it because you think I can be of assistance to her?"

Yang Yu sighed and said, "I know very well that by coming to see Great General Xiang like this, you are already being very kind to me by not chasing me out of your residence. It's just that Meimei and I are closer than real

sisters, the others are afraid of Lu Buwei's authority and are keeping silent. In the whole of Xianyang City now, Great General is the only one who holds no regard for Lu Buwei at all. Meimei and I are really at our wits end so we can only shamelessly come and seek Lord Xiang's help."

Xiang Shaolong asked worriedly, "Wasn't Meimei always on good terms with Lord Lao? Now that his power has increased greatly, if he is willing to marry Meimei and she doesn't mind, it should be very difficult for Lu Buwei to raise objections."

Yang Yu revealed a look of disdain as she said with a snort, "What is Lao Ai, at the very most he is just a toy boy of the Dowager. He can come out and flirt around but a month ago, someone gave him two song courtesans and in the end they were beaten to death by the Dowager's people. Great General, please tell me who else would have the guts to marry into his residence."

Xiang Shaolong was shocked speechless. He remembered during Lu Buwei's birthday feast, Zhu Ji's defensive looking eyes were full of vicious hatred, her whole demeanor was icy. Zhu Ji has really changed too much.

Ever since Lu Buwei caused the death of King Zhuangxiao, something went wrong in her psychology.

But still, he did not expect her to turn into such a terrible woman.

Yang Yu continued, "Besides Meimei was just putting on a show with him. Initially she was indeed charmed by his suave and handsome exterior but ever since she heard from Bai Lei the atrocious acts he has done in the past,

she only developed feelings of detest and none of joy.”

Xiang Shaolong thought to himself that Bai lei must have heard about Lao Ai’s atrocities from Han Xie and knowing Han Xie, he’ll definitely spare no mercy with his tongue and pepper the stories.

But then again, Lao Ai does deserve it.

Yang Yu’s expression suddenly softened as she looked at him with great affection, “Only Master Xiang has the best reputation. Even your enemies can’t come out with anything bad you’ve done. At first we did not understand, but after we’ve seen how understanding Master Xiang was when we kept offending you, knowing that we were forced into it and even treating us with courtesy, we were secretly very grateful.”

Xiang Shaolong said with a wry smile, “It’s most difficult trying to be a good person. Honestly, regarding Lu Buwei’s intention to marry Meimei as his concubine, it’s very difficult for me to interfere and besides, there is no reason for me to interfere.”

Yang Yu replied confidently, “But at least there are two ways Master Xiang can help Meimei. The simplest way is of course for Master Xiang to make Meimei your own concubine but I know very well that this request is overboard and it will also result in enmity between Master Xiang and Lord Lao.”

Xiang Shaolong sighed, “What about the other solution?”

Yang Yu chewed on her lower lip as she said, "Help her escape from Qin."

Xiang Shaolong asked quizzically, "Helping her leave the country is an easy task for me. I just need to give my instructions and it will be done but the problem is, she is such a beauty that no matter where she goes, there will be people who hanker after her beauty. So isn't it out of the frying pan and into the fire? If she bumps into bandits or hooligans, her outcome will be worse than anyone can imagine."

Yang Yu said elatedly, "As long as Master Xiang is agreeable than everything's fine. Meimei has a royalty from Wei who admires her and has on many occasions sent his men here to beg Meimei to go to Daliang. If Master Xiang were to send men to inform him and ask him to send his people to receive her at the border, then Meimei's safety will not be a problem."

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Who is this royalty?"

Yang Yu whispered, "It was Crown Prince of Wei, who used to be held hostage in Xianyang but later escaped back to Daliang."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly enlightened.

It seems that Dan Meimei is not really in love with him, but if she becomes the Crown Princess, it's much better than to become Lu Buwei's sex object.

Xiang Shaolong knows himself very well, he is not one to harden his heart and refuse to help so he replied with a wry smile, "All right, you'll tell Meimei to feign illness, even Wu Fu is not allowed to see her. When everyone is

attending the feast tonight, I'll send men to send her away and travel through the night. On top of that I will send fast horses to inform the Crown prince and Lord Longyang. The only problematic thing is that we have to make it look as if Meimei ran away on her own so that it will not implicate Miss Yu and the others."

Yang Yu threw herself into his arms in joy, her eyes red.

Xiang Shaolong was shaken as he exclaimed, "If you want to thank me, sit down properly quick."

Yang Yu couldn't care less and gave him a big kiss on the lips before she moved a small distance away, her eyes watery as she choked in tears, "Even if Meimei and I try to repay you till our deaths, it is till not enough to repay Master Xiang's magnanimity in forgiving us for our past misdeeds."

Only then is Xiang Shaolong sure that this is not a trap for if it is, Yang Yu must be an award winning actress. Besides, there's no need for him to be personally involved in this matter so it'll be impossible if they want to harm him.

After discussing the details for contact with Yang Yu, he asked in passing, "Why aren't you leaving together with Meimei?"

Yang Yu glanced at him awkwardly, wanting to speak out but stopped herself. Finally she lowered her head, her pretty face blushing. Her behavior was extremely alluring.

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened as he exclaimed, "So Miss Yu is in love with Guan Zhongxie."

Yang Yu shook her head, "How could it be him? That is a cold blooded and heartless person. Every time after he's had his fun with me, he'd chase me away immediately, saying that he's not used to sleeping with others. A man like that, only Third Missy Lu would take a liking to him."

Xiang Shaolong replied, "Of course he wouldn't treat Lu Niangrong the same way. I know, it must be that fellow Xu Shang, he is indeed very handsome."

Yang Yu chewed on her lips without saying anything but her expression was filled with worry and helplessness. Only after a long pause did she say, "It's the same everywhere I go. If Lu Buwei forces me to become his concubine, I can only submit to my fate. But Meimei is a lot stronger than me. Hai, I'm afraid Master Xiang will not believe me even if I say it but I have no wish to lie to Master Xiang in any matter. Meimei's suicide attempt is just a farce Meimei and I thought of to delay Lu Buwei."

Xiang Shaolong was surprised, "I'm already very careful but I was still duped by both of you."

Yang Yu promised, "Now there's nothing we're hiding from you. Initially I dare not come and look for Master Xiang at all but Meimei said you're the only person who can help her and will certainly help her. Because she knows that Master Xiang is a natural born, true and chivalric hero."

Xiang Shaolong added wryly again, "She's really accurate in her assessment

of this great fool here.”

Yang Yu wiped away her tears and revealed a charming smile, “Meimei said, if Master Xiang doesn’t want her, then just send her away. Hai, which girl in Xianyang city now does not wish to marry into Master Xiang’s family?”

Xiang Shaolong secretly thought her formidable. If a woman wants to get into the good books of a man, a ‘professional’ like Yang Yu will certainly be very outstanding, so much so that even if one knows that it’s just false flattery, he’ll still feel good hearing it.

At least there are still Guiyan, Lu Nianrong and even Yingying have no wish to marry him, Xiang Shaolong.

Xiang Shaolong saw that there’s not much time left since now he has to arrange for Dan Meimei to escape Xianyang, prepare to attend the feast at the palace tonight and also worried that Ji Yanran and the rest will have some misunderstanding so he hurriedly send Yang Yu off on her way.

After Yang Yu left, the first thing Xiang Shaolong did was to look for Zhao Da because he had once stayed with Zhao Ya in Daliang for a long period of time so he is most familiar with the local situation. He is the most appropriate person to be in charge of this matter.

Dan Meimei is gone just like that. The most unlucky person will be Wu Fu and this can possibly force him to take one step further to ally himself with him and become a useful pawn in Lu Buwei’s organization.



Zhao Da thought it would be some dangerous mission and on hearing that it's only to send Dan Meimei to the Wei border, he agreed happily.

When Xiang Shaolong returned to the inner residence, he thought that Ji Yanran and the rest would have been garbed in finery and waiting to attend the feast. Instead, his wives and maids were having fun with the kids, still dressed in their day to day wear and doesn't look like they're planning to attend the feast at all.

Xiang Shaolong was puzzled, "Aren't you going to join in the festivities?"

Ji Yanran lay languidly on the cushions and she replied tiredly, "My lord husband seems to have forgotten who had to lift up that dragon tail to slap the river the whole morning, and who was made to stand for hours in court to read the edicts like a punishment. I had thought of going but after my bath I seem to have suddenly lost all my energy. I just want to do nothing at all, and have no energy to think of why my lord husband was chatting half the night away with a lady from Drunken Wind Loft."

Xiang Shaolong was initially filled with pity, then he was almost filled with fury as he knelt down and kissed her cheek and at the same time asked Wu Tingfang, "What about the rest of you?"

Zhao Zhi pouted her lips, "Since Sister Yanran is not going, would we have the mood to go?" Xiang Shaolong is finally gaining some understanding as he raised his arms in surrender, "God be my witness, I, Xiang Shaolong and Yang Yu had never had any past entanglements, and it's the same for today. The reason she..."

Ji Yanran suddenly covered his mouth with her hand as she said with a laugh, "Don't be overly suspicious, we were just making fun of you!"

Wu Tingfang chuckled charmingly, "But it's true we won't be attending the feast. The sight of Lu Buwei makes me think of... hai, don't talk about it."

Looking at her darkened expression, Xiang Shaolong immediately thought of his lovely Zhao Qian and Chunying, and understood her meaning.

Tian Zhen and Tian Feng came over and helped him up to assist him in his bath.

After he was appropriately dressed, he went to the hall where Teng Yi and Jing Jun were chatting idly with Tao Fang as they waited for him.

Xiang Shaolong asked, "Have Zhao Da informed you about Dan Meimei's matter?"

Teng Yi nodded his head, "It's just a small matter. But if it can anger Lu Buwei and cause trouble for Wu Fu, it's a happy task."

Jing Jun sighed, "Dan Meimei is precisely clear about this point, so she's not worried that you will not agree. This woman is indeed very beautiful."

Xiang Shaolong was enlightened by his words and immediately his impression of Yang Yu dropped. He is really too ready to look at on the bright side of things.

Tao Li said, "I saw Tu Xian earlier and he asked me if the Black Dragon is Shaolong's idea. I dare not lie to him and Tu Xian wants me to tell you that he is really impressed with you. This marvelous plan is even better than stabbing Lu Buwei with your sword. Lu Buwei was livid with anger when he went home and guessed that it was us who came up with all this balderdash but there's nothing he could do at all. Tu Xian said with Lu Buwei's character, he may choose to take a risk and told us to be even more careful."

Xiang Shaolong was secretly startled as he bowed his head in humble acknowledgement. Indeed victory has gone up to his head and he is on cloud nine, and this is very dangerous.

Teng Yi smiled, "Guan Zhongxie arrested a group of people but from what I see they are innocents. He's thinking of using these people as scapegoats but they were taken away by our Minister of Justice so he can't torture a confession out of them. This time even Guan Zhongxie has lost his authority."

Jing Jun complained, "The sight of Guoxing irks me yet Third Brother wants me to teach him the ropes. Ai!"

Xiang Shaolong grabbed his arms and pulled him closer, saying with a serious expression, "A fault confessed is half redressed. Xiao Jun, just be kindhearted this one time and give him a chance!"

Teng Yi stood up and announced, "It's almost time, let us leave for the Palace!"

Xiang Shaolong reminded him, "Remember to bring your Mozi sword."

Tonight will be filled with great performances.”

Tao Fang was surprised, “How can such things happen? This is the royal feast of Great Qin, without the approval of the ruler, who dares to create trouble?”

Xiang Shaolong tapped the Hundred Battles Sword hanging from his waist and laughed, “We are the ones the ruler gave approval to, to save us the trouble of finding the Warrior School again in future.”

Only then did Teng and Jing understand.

Xiang Shaolong led the way and walked towards the main door as he chortled, “Birth of the Black Dragon. It’s a sign from heaven and also a joyous occasion. We’ll just wish Qiu Risheng an early happy new year.”

Teng, Jing and Tao laughed as they ran after him and stepped out together.

The 18 elite guards and the personal guards of Teng, Jing and Tao were already waiting outside with the horses.

After the four of them mounted their horses, they swept out of the main gates towards the direction of the Palace.

The whole of Xianyang City was covered with night fog and it looked eerily like a ghost city.

Once Xiang Shaolong thought of his impending return to the relaxing farm,

he was in a happier mood.

Ever since Zhao Qian and the rest unfortunately lost their lives in another land, he has not felt so carefree like what he is feeling now, no longer having the feeling that he is being crushed by an invisible burden so heavy that he cannot breath.

End of Book 19